

CULTIVATING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN CONSUMER CULTURE

A THESIS

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BY  
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To my dad and mom,  
For believing in Jesus Christ and believing in me.

For some time now I have been troubled by the seeming disappearance of any robust alternative to the pervasive culture of late capitalism, whether in the church or in the society at large. We are drowning in floods of consumer goods and are drenched in showers of media images. We live in a smorgasbord culture in which everything is interesting and nothing really matters. We have lost a vision of the good life, and our hopes for the future are emptied of moral content. Instead of purposefully walking to determinate places, we are aimlessly floating with random currents. Of course, we do get exercised by issues and engage in bitter feuds over them. But that makes us even less capable of resisting the pull of the larger culture, a resistance that would take shape in formulating and embodying a coherent alternative way of life.

—Miroslav Volf

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## NOTE TO READER

This work represents a thesis-project for the Doctor of Ministry Program of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. As such it meets the requirements of content and composition, albeit in a slightly altered form. A word about this alteration will make this clear. Chapter 1, entitled, “Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” introduces the problem and its setting. Chapters 2 through 4 serve as the Literature Review as they survey the relevant literature in reaching a description of our current cultural situation and the status of personal identity within that situation. The first half of Chapter 5 represents the Theological Framework portion as it offers a theological and Biblical account of identity which, both counters the cultural account of identity and sets the course and destination for a ministry practice which aims to cultivate a Christian identity instead of a cultural one. The second half of Chapter 5 serves the purpose of Project Design. It defines what constitutes an adequate praxis which will meet the goals outlined in the theological framework. Chapter 6 comprises the Outcome section as it gets down to brass tacks, as it were, and details how the practice of ministry will take shape and be affected by the foregoing framework and analysis. It will also offer a summary as well as suggestions for others concerned with the problem.

## ABSTRACT

Of

### Cultivating Christian Identity in Consumer Culture

Monte M. Johnston

This work is concerned with problem of a comprised, self-conscious identity among the North American Church today that exists because consumerism dominates culture. It traces the history of the development of advanced consumer capitalism, from the early days of the industrial revolution until the present. The work then turns to analyzing some key features of consumerist culture, with special attention given to the loss of certainty, individualism, choice and consumption, and commodification. Focus turns to analyzing how identity is constructed and portrayed in such an environment. The key features include the focus on the individual, the role of branding and shopping. Over against this picture, an exploration is made of the Biblical view of human identity. A proposal is then made that the best means for the church to combat consumerism is through the adoption of practices, particularly as introduced by Alistiar McIntyre. The work then concludes with an exploration of one possible and powerful practice, hospitality. Hospitality is examined starting from its Biblical roots up to current proposals. Practical advice is then offered as to how a church might implement this practice.

## CHAPTER 1

### CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

According to the Bible, God calls the church out of the world for the sake of the world. One of the reasons that the church exists is to be salt and light to the world. It is to be a light in the darkness and salt in a world of decay. It is supposed to be this, and indeed, it often is. Yet, it is always in danger of losing its saltiness. What then? For as Jesus asked, “how can its saltiness be restored?” (Matt. 5.13)<sup>1</sup> The church is always in danger of losing sight of its identity in Jesus Christ. It is always in danger of being in the world and too much *of* the world. In the history of the church there have been times of crises when the danger was more real and more threatening. The present situation of the life of the American church is one of those times. The church is in danger of drowning in the flood of contemporary culture as it adopts its values and outlook. Take as evidence that, on the one hand, the membership of the mainline denominations is in deep decline, indicating that people no longer find that the message it proclaims is compelling. On the other hand, a sociological look at evangelical churches has revealed that there is very little difference between the lives of evangelical Christians and the general population.

Consider the following:

- Conservative Protestants are *more* likely to divorce than the rest of the population.
- While the income of U.S. Christians has increased dramatically over the last 30 years, giving as a percentage of income continues to fall, especially among

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<sup>1</sup> The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible (NRSV), copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

evangelicals.

- Evangelicals are among the most likely to object to having black neighbors.
- Evangelicals also justify and engage in sexual promiscuity at alarming rates.<sup>2</sup>

All of this caused Michael Horton to conclude from all of the sociological data that “evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general.”<sup>3</sup> How can the salt regain its saltiness?

There have always been threats to the faith. The great theologians of the faith have identified the chief threat of their time and responded to it in an attempt to save the church from it. The apostle Paul responded to a legalism that spawned a sense of pride and a move toward separatism. Athanasius (c. 296 – 373) suffered much to stop the spread of Arianism, which compromised the full divinity of the Son of God. Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430) had Pelagius to oppose and that opposition shaped his faith. Martin Luther (1483 - 1546) and John Calvin (1509 - 1564) were in a mighty struggle against a Roman Catholic faith that was badly corrupt. Karl Barth (1886 – 1968) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 – 1945) risked much and gave much to stand up against the idolatry of the Nazis. The list could go on.

The point is that each age faces a new danger and in each age that danger is embraced by many and opposed by a faithful few who, by God’s grace, win the day. The natural question, the necessary question, is what is that threat in our day? A flip through newspaper pages or television channels will unleash a torrent of new trends, philosophies,

<sup>2</sup> All of these findings were collected and reported by Ron Sider, “The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience,” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* (January/February 2005), 8-9, 39-42. The article is an excerpt from his book by the same name published by Baker Books, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Sider from Michael Horton, “Beyond Culture Wars,” *Modern Reformation* (May/June 1993), 3.

events, styles, economic statistics, personalities and political realities. Where does the danger lurk? The difficulty is that, while some things in the culture may loom large, they do not have much influence in the daily lives and minds of people. If you focus on those things and ignore the idols that do have the influence and power, then you risk calling attention to the wrong things, thus leaving God's people worse off than before, since they will be attending to the wrong dangers. In such a situation, one risks proclaiming a gospel that not only supports the status quo, but also gives divine legitimization to an ungodly, unwholesome and sinful life. For an example, one needs only to think of all of the biblical reasons given to support the institution of slavery in this country to understand the dangers and temptations. There are high stakes riding on this venture.

Some have suggested that the greatest present danger to the church is postmodernism, which holds that all morals, values, and beliefs are merely constructed by culture, and therefore are always open to revision. They believe that this is the Goliath of our age who stands tall and mocks the people of God. The problem with this assessment is that, while only a microscopic portion of the population of the United States have read or even heard of the names of the postmodernists or their books, the assumptions and beliefs that they hold are also held by a great bulk of the population. The natural question is, so where are these beliefs and values coming from? There is no demagogue, or charismatic leader, who is purveying these ideas. These beliefs and assumptions can be found in all layers of society, in the uneducated as well as the educated; they appear irrespective of race or class. They seem to be in the water; that is how prevalent they are.

It is the thesis of this work that the greatest danger to the church lies in our very way of life. The chief threat to the witness of the church is *advanced consumer*

*capitalism.*<sup>4</sup> This way of life is what makes the ideas of postmodernism seem credible.

In turn, it also makes the ideas of the Bible less plausible.<sup>5</sup>

Before continuing, a few objections must be met and laid to rest. To single out advanced consumer capitalism is not to say that capitalism must go. Capitalism has proved to be the most efficient means of producing and distributing goods to the population, goods that the population truly wants. It also provides unprecedented opportunity for wealth and advancement and fulfillment to a majority of the population. It is not without its problems, to be sure. Yet, the singling out of advanced consumer capitalism is not a call for communism or any other system.

Nor is this an indictment of consumption. In every age in history there has always been, and always will be, a combination of production and consumption. And at every point there is always the tendency to consume too much—too much for one's own good and too much for the good of one's neighbor. Gluttony and drunkenness we have had, and always will have, with us.

The denunciation of consumer capitalism is also about more than materialism. Jesus warned the rich young ruler about the danger of possessions to the spiritual life. There is nothing new in this. Material things, or “stuff,” have always been the cause of greed, covetousness, and envy.

What is different about consumer capitalism is the role that it gives to

<sup>4</sup> My thinking on this point was solidified by a lecture given by Andy Crouch in a class, “Ministry to Postmodern Generations,” as part of the Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, January 2004.

<sup>5</sup> This is further evidenced by the fact that the Judaism is under the same assault. Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin writes of Jewish struggles against consumerism in *Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah*, Second Edition (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996). Salkin sees families interpreting and celebrating these coming-of-age ceremonies more with the lenses of consumerism than with the lenses of faith. His goal is to call them back a spiritual meaning.

consumption. It has spawned a new “ism” called consumerism. Consumerism differs from materialism in that while materialism focuses on the stuff, consumerism is about the *meaning* that the stuff has in society. It is not too much of a reach to say that consumerism has become the civil religion of America. In fact, this happens to be a very helpful way to think about consumerism in America. This is not just true for America since consumerism is spreading around the world at breakneck speed. For consumers the television commercial has become our story, its jingle our song. Instead of longing for the life hereafter we desire the new thing and the next thing. Instead of community, to which we give so much lip service, we really love commodities. And the mall has become our temple. Consumerism is the spirit of the age. It is the result of a long history of cultural development. Along with other factors it is essential in explaining why people believe that all morals and values and beliefs are social by-products, as well as in understanding why individual choice and preference are exalted. In so far as Christians serve this idol we are in a new Babylonian captivity.

The single most pressing issue for captives is whether or not they can retain their identity. The question for the church is whether or not the people of God will capitulate and be conformed to the dominant culture or will they be transformed and retain their particular status and calling in the world. This was the issue before Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Esther in the Babylonian captivity of the Jews.

In the end consumerism is about the question of identity. In the midst of a powerful and compelling culture, will the people of God maintain their identity in him? As Christians answer the universal questions — Who am I? What should I do? What is my purpose? How should I relate to others and to the world? – will the revelation of God in Jesus Christ be at the center of their answers? Or will they use the answers supplied by

the culture, by advertisers, and by their peers? It remains an open question.

The first chapter investigates the origins of our present social and economic system. It is always helpful to view the present reality over against that of the past. In so doing we are able to see the contrasts and to understand what is distinctive about our era. At the same time we come to understand the continuities between previous eras and our own. We learn more of who we are when we are able to keep in view where we have come from. The social situation in which we live did not arise out of nothing but has been built on the foundation of early conditions, accomplishments, failures, ideas, and systems. This work shall begin with a look at the premodern world where tradition powerfully determined society's thinking, perception and relationships. Then, it will briefly survey some key developments that changed that world and gave rise to the modern world, which in turn, had its own developments and influential ideas. One of the most determinative developments is the rejection of tradition in any of its forms. This rejection is epitomized by such figures as Emmanuel Kant and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In their work, the 'autonomous individual' was put in the place of society as the locus and focus of meaning and order. This move catapulted the issue of one's identity and self-understanding to the forefront of modern problems. It is the development and full flowering of the modern era that gave rise to the present one, where the forces of the market have triumphed.

The second chapter consists in a survey of some of the high points of the geography of the contemporary social world, where the rejection of tradition has come to full flower. The rejection of the constraints of tradition has also meant the absence of its positive side, its sense of rootedness and stability and meaningfulness. The tradition-less individual, who must spin his or her own web of meaning and significance, is the resident

of this new world. In a post-traditional environment each one must determine for themselves who they are and want to be. It is impossible to make sense of this consumeristic individual without the complementary features of television and the mall. Both offer an amazing array of promises and choices, which helps to make choice the highest good of the culture. The irony is that in consumer culture the proffered choices are rendered arbitrary and meaningless. The main realm in which choices are made is in the market. The values of the market and the activity of shopping have a tremendous power to shape and form those who participate in it. This shaping is not just a force in the personal realm, but also in the realm of relationships and family. The resulting problems are profound and profoundly problematic.

While the second chapter looks at the assumptions and features of consumer culture as a whole, the third chapter narrows the scope of investigation and focuses on the forms that personal identity take in consumer culture. To analyze these forms an interpretive framework that has been used to understand whole cultures will be turned on the individual. Personal identity, while infinitely complex, can be profitably understood as sum of the story or stories people tell, the symbols they use and identify with, and regular activities they undertake. By and large the form that the key stories in consumer culture take is that of personal, individual narrative. These stories have more in common with the stories that come through the television than those in the Bible and tend to be unconnected to larger stories of a people, a nation, or a religion. The symbols that consumers embrace are those connected with corporations, the brands that appear on clothes, cars, even carrots. The symbols and their values are very transitory and unstable. The most prominent practice is shopping, shopping not just for stuff, but for the self. The extent and pervasiveness of this form of identity is staggering.

The fourth chapter is another study in contrasts. It attempts to answer the question, “If the preceding is the form of identity in consumer culture, how should identity be understood?” It investigates identity as understood in light of the Bible and in light of the God of the Bible who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this light identity is founded upon faith in and of Jesus Christ, enacted in the love of the Father, and directed toward the hope of the Holy Spirit, all in the context of the missional community. The contrast between this view of identity and that of consumerism could not be starker.

The fifth chapter evaluates different responses by Christians to consumer culture. Many of the responses seem inadequate given the all-pervasive nature of consumerism and consumer culture. An adequate response needs to arise from the Biblical view of personal identity. It needs to be robust enough to withstand “commodification,” a feature that will be examined in the course of the work. The response needs to address the creature in her fullness—both mind and body, the mental and the bodily aspects. The context for one’s life, adequately conceived, is a concrete community of believers who share the commitment to countering consumerism. The idea of “practice” fulfills these criteria. While a practice determines the form of an adequate response to consumer culture, the Scriptures provide the focus and direction for the content. A renewed focus on the Scriptures by the church has historically led to a renewed sense of life and identity in Christ.

The final chapter is an exploration into one possible practice. There are many good candidates that might be chosen by a congregation, the practice of hospitality will be explored. The purpose of this is to give the reader a look at how a congregation might pursue one practice so that he or she might look at their own congregation, armed with suggestions and possibilities for selecting a practice. The advantage of the practice of

hospitality is that it puts its practitioners in contact with “the least of these.” Such interaction can help dispel the illusions conjured by advertising about what life is about. Instead of being presented with images of an ideal consumerist world where desires are evoked and products peddled to meet those desires, the Christian will have to wrestle with their of wealth and their stewardship of it in relation to the poor. For, Christian hospitality has the materially less fortunate as its goal. If this practice is really pursued it will also lead to the realization that the “least of these” have as much to offer back as they will receive. However, what wealthy Christians need from them is not monetary. In all of this, the practice of hospitality should directly impact and shape one’s identity and the identity of a congregation. If a community undertakes this practice and makes it the center of its common life, it might be enough to resist the forces of consumerism.

It is the chief end of this work to analyze and examine advanced consumer capitalism and to propose a solution robust enough to stem the tide. The solution will take the form of a ‘practice,’ which involves a whole community of Christians. This focus on a community means that, more or less, this solution is one for individual churches. They are the intended audience of this work for they are the key to the solution.

But first we go back to the beginning...

## CHAPTER 2

# THE RISE OF ADVANCED CONSUMER CAPITALISM

### ***Identity in Traditional Society***

Advanced consumer capitalism represents the full flowering of modernity, that period in history whose roots reach back into the period of the Renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. To understand the modern age it is helpful to view it in contrast to the age that came before, called the Middle Ages in the West. In the West this was the age of Christendom, when Christianity became *the* religion of culture and country. The great narrative of the culture was the one provided by the Bible, the story of the Creator God, whose disobedient creatures lived in a state of rebellion until God sent his Son to become human and die that all might be restored to its original intention. As life was all too often nasty, brutish, and short, most took great comfort in the promise of paradise to come. The problem was getting there.

Society in this age, as throughout most of history, was strongly hierarchical. For instance, the height of the government would be the king, then the dukes, the knights and the serfs. Starting with the Holy Roman Empire, kings sought the approval of the pope to cement their position and authority. In so doing, they tapped into the great narrative of the Christianity, which taught that God ordained temporal rulers to exercise authority, as a means of legitimating their rule. Any person in society would know his or her place in these systems.

For present purposes, it is interesting to inquire how the average person conceived identity during this time. If asked the question, “Who are you?” one would likely answer by stating his or her place within the respective hierarchies. People may have worried

about their status in the life to come, but as to their status in this life there could be no doubt. At least in regard to its structure it was a very stable environment. Also, there was relatively little movement from place to place. One grew up, and grew old, surrounded by relatives and community members that stayed fairly constant.<sup>1</sup> Their sense of identity came largely from their sense of place, geographic, social, and religious. Such a sense would have been a sure and certain, if not a little constraining and even oppressive. The most likely kind of person to have an identity crisis would be those people who did not have a “legitimate” place, e.g. foreigners, illegitimate children, Jews, etc. The mainstream of society would have a solid sense of who they were.

This conception of life that is dominated by tradition is not limited to Europe in the Middle Ages. Today, all around the globe, this ‘premodern’ life is present and thriving. For example, Clifford Geertz describes what defines a person for the Balinese of Indonesia, “It is not what a man is as a man (as we would phrase it) that matters, but where he fits in a set of cultural categories which not only do not change but, being transhuman, cannot.”<sup>2</sup> In premodern societies it is generally the institutions that carry the weight and do the hard work of providing secure identities for their members.

Into this relatively static environment of the West appeared in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century a series of crises that upset this social system by generating an enormous amount of change. They ran the gamut: economic, religious, scientific, and geographic. Economic change was steady and powerful. Prosperity led to increased trade and the beginnings of a middle-class of merchants. The new social mobility weakened the older

<sup>1</sup>Borgmann describes the salient characteristics of the Middle Ages as local boundedness, cosmic centeredness, and divine constitution. Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5. Cf. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 96-97.

<sup>2</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 387.

social system. Religious changes also altered the landscape.

When the Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, nailed the *95 Theses* to the door of the castle at Wittenberg, the unintended result was the Protestant Reformation, with its constant proliferation of new sects and denominations. Once the pluralism of churches was unleashed, people no longer had their place in the order of the church dictated by birth. It was now up to their own choice or the choice of the ruler over the province in which they lived. In this new religious worldview the individual believer was not saved by belonging to the church but by his or her own faith. This marked a turn toward the individual whose ramifications are felt perhaps most keenly in our own day. Before this shift, ‘faith’ predominately referred to the faith of the church as a whole, in its aggregate of doctrines, sacraments, pious practices, and religious orders. It was a highly communal affair. But for the churches of the Reformation, faith meant the belief and understanding of each Christian, as they were expected to be able to give their own account of their beliefs before God and others. As time went on this focus on each individual person giving an expression to his or her individual faith first became secularized in the modern era and then commercialized in the present day, as we shall see.

Before the consequences of Luther’s action could be fully seen, Nicolas Copernicus published his work on the solar system in 1531. The new scientific insights signaled a shift in the source of truth and security from revelation to human science and discovery. The new purveyors of knowledge were scientists, not priests. This amounted to another blow to the psychological certainty of the fading era.

All of these factors contributed to a breakdown in the old traditions and structures. While the grand narrative of Christianity was still held by most people to be the story that explained the world, it was already on a course where it would be relegated to the

periphery of social discourse. These social transformations had an unsettling effect, which dramatically changed the way that people thought about themselves as well as their place and purpose on earth.

## ***The Birth of the Modern***

### **Out with the Old in with the New**

The changes noted in the last section were only a beginning of a process that would take centuries to unfold and develop. The full consequences of many of those changes are only apparent in the present day. This unfolding process of modernity has had two main aspects.

The first aspect is the death of tradition as a source of authority and knowledge and order. Premodern people lived fully immersed in the “givens” of the traditional order. The ideas of truth, authority, and identity were taken as firm, fixed and dependable, even if oppressive. It was only after the revolutions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that they became problematic for many people. The death of tradition as an authority has been a very long and slow process. But even at the earliest stages, some observers were able to foresee its consequences. Notably, John Donne writes a powerful and oft-quoted poem called, *An Anatomy of the World*, in 1611:

‘Tis all in peeces, all cohaerance gone;  
All just supply, and all Relation:  
Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,  
For every man alone thinks he hath got  
To be a Phoenix, and that there can bee  
None of that kinde, of which be is, but hee.<sup>3</sup>

Donne is dismayed at disarray that occurs as the old institutions are thrown off in

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Toulmin, 65.

revolutionary furor. The values of family and community that used to provide for a common good, above that of the individual, are unraveling. Former roles and obligations are displaced by a sense that each person is unlike all others. “Each individual sees himself as unique and inimitable, and reinvents his pattern of life, like a Phoenix.”<sup>4</sup> What began as an act of rebellion and freedom, as each one could define himself or herself, becomes a task and a burden, since in the absence of tradition each one *must* define themselves as societal roles no longer seem sufficient. The roles and duties of tradition have been shrugged off and left behind.

A significant consequence of this rejection of tradition is the process of secularization. People answered the questions of truth, identity, and authority with less and less reference to God and the Bible. God and revelation were moved first from the center to the margin, then from the margin right off the page. Human abilities and human reason were moved to the center of the stage in God’s absence. The highpoint in the confidence of Reason’s ability to tame the wild world with all its unpredictable forces was an intellectual project known as the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment’s aim was to critique and do away with the superstitions that were passed along by tradition and to reorganize society and human life according to the laws of Reason. The key to success, in this view, was to be found in each individual using his or her own reason to face the world and to answer its challenges and questions.

This leads to the second aspect of modernism—the rise of the individual. Premodern societies generally answer life’s problems with communal answers. This response derives less from a philosophical motive and more from basic necessity. Take the economic order as an example. The social structures of families, clans, guilds, orders,

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<sup>4</sup>Toulmin, 65-66.

and the like, allow for a division of labor, which increases productivity. For instance, an isolated individual would not have the time and energy to plow a field with livestock, wash clothes in a nearby stream, fetch water for cooking, prepare a meal over a fire, get milk, obtain food, and so on. An extended family, however, could accomplish all of these things to the betterment of all. With the increase in prosperity and productivity in the modern era, individuals have sufficient wealth and resources to buy the things they need. They are freed from the bonds of necessity that tied them to family and community. The new self-sufficiency led philosophers and writers to give greater consideration to the life of the individual. The old bonds came increasingly to be viewed as limitations and liabilities.<sup>5</sup> Freedom from these bonds became the cry that has grown louder with each passing year.

The forces of modernization and secularization marginalized the grand narrative of Christianity as the explanatory framework for understanding the world and the self. A new story was needed to ward off a meaningless life that had no source or goal. Two intellectuals provided this story in the modern era: Immanuel Kant, a pro-Enlightenment figure and Ralph Waldo Emerson, a reactionary to the Enlightenment. There were many others, of course, but the work of these two men had immeasurable influence on the thinkers and writers that followed them as they mapped out a story that is retold and striven for even today; it is the story of the individual.

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<sup>5</sup>Albert Borgmann notes, “Families identified themselves with the moral standards of the community; they depended on communal cooperation for entertainment and celebration. But with the rise and progressive articulation of modern prosperity and liberty, these communal ties came to be seen as burdens and have since been removed to make room for commodious individualism, the unencumbered enjoyment of consumption goods and commodities.” *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 43.

## The Faith of Our Fathers

The greatest of all Enlightenment thinkers was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Kant was a philosopher of the highest rank. Kant's thinking was decisively shaped by the advancement of science and technology that was going on around him. He has been called the father of modern philosophy. To get a better understanding of his life and work, it is helpful to consider the scientific and technological changes that were remolding the society around him.

Before Kant was born the following things had already occurred: Newton had formulated his laws of motion, developed the idea of universal gravitation, explained the motion of the planets, and built the first telescope. This era was filled with a bewildering number of discoveries and advancements in knowledge. The speed of light had been measured. The portable watch and steam engine had been invented. Pulse rates were measured. Coke had been produced and used in smelting iron. The first inoculation against small pox was introduced. All of this happened before Kant's birth in 1724.

During Kant's lifetime the quadrant and chronometer were developed to make travel at sea safer and more predictable. Cataract surgery was first performed. Machines were built to make screws and nails. Current electricity was produced. A working telegraph was demonstrated. The table of chemical elements was printed. Microorganisms were defined as germs. The cotton gin was invented as well as lithography—to name a few 'firsts.' The abundance of new discoveries fostered the sense that there would be no end to the improvement of the conditions of humanity. It is no wonder that the belief in reason, the scientific method, and technology was unshakable and ascendant in society. There was great confidence in the power of the individual,

using his<sup>6</sup> innate abilities, to understand and exercise control over the world. It was dubbed the age of enlightenment because where once there was the darkness of ignorance, now there was the light of understanding. The lines that were penned in celebration of Newton's accomplishments tell much: "Nature and nature's laws lay hidden in the night: God said, 'Let Newton be,' and all was light."

In a book called, *What is Enlightenment?* Kant wrote down his understanding of what it meant to be enlightened,

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.... "Have courage to use your own reason"—that is the motto of enlightenment.<sup>7</sup>

According to Kant, to be enlightened is to be free from the influence of others, which he calls tutelage. Kant was a great proponent of two things: freedom, which he called autonomy or 'self-rule', and reason. In order to be free the individual relies on reason and reason alone. This reliance means rejecting all traditional authorities and orders. In his view, there can no longer be any following—only trail-blazing. Kant prohibits the individual from taking direction from another. Vanquished is the idea that true wisdom is found by building on the foundation laid by others, of standing on the shoulders of giants, of learning from the mistakes and insights of those who have walked the road before; gone is even any acknowledgment that others helped us get to where we are. As Kant sees the world, the chief problem is the darkness of ignorance and superstition that is perpetuated by tradition and its authority. The individual's salvation is found in casting

<sup>6</sup>I use the word, "his," deliberately here since during this era it was the men who were given the opportunity to develop their intellectual abilities to the fullest.

<sup>7</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *What is Enlightenment?* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), 85.

off traditional authorities and using one's own logic to find the truth that orders all life, both public and private. This truth is found in Reason, which he believed to be universal, and yet still accessible to each individual. This standard applies not only to truth but also to morality. Kant saw the individual following a universal law of ethics that was above any community or tradition.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to all of this, he changed how intellectuals thought about knowledge. He turned completely away from a view that held that knowledge was passed on by a community in the form of tradition, to one where each individual encounters the external world with their own internal framework. The result, according to him, was true knowledge. This development furthered pushed the individual to the center, and laid the foundation for a more subjective interpretation of knowledge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The power of Kant's philosophy was the story that it told. It was an optimistic tale of the individual, who raises himself from the mists of ignorance into the light of new life. Reason is the higher power that conquers the evils of the world. The goal of life was to free oneself from the bondage to traditional authorities and communities and to rely on Reason's guiding light.

After Kant's life and work, the turn toward the individual continued from an insistence on the freedom of the individual to use his or her powers to an emphasis on the uniqueness or individuality of a person in and of him- or herself.<sup>9</sup>

While many seized on Kant's work, others complained that there was more to human existence than Reason. One response was from a group called the Romantics who agreed with Enlightenment thinkers that the belief in the lone individual was the answer

<sup>8</sup>Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 80.

<sup>9</sup>Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" in *Cultural Sociology*, Ed. Lyn Spillman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 28.

and source of truth and ethics. But they felt that the individual was most true and certain, not as he or she turned outward to the world as Kant held, but as the person turned inward with the goal of being true to his or her unique individuality. The Romantics pointed to an inner voice and the ideas of feeling and sentiment.<sup>10</sup> The call was to be true to what was inside of each individual, which was held to be the moral thing to do. The greatest proponent in Europe of this way of seeing the human task was Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78). However, perhaps more influential in the American context was Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), called the father of American literature, is the very embodiment of these ideals of autonomous individualism and promoted them in his very influential writings. In his essay “Self-Reliance,” he stated his doctrine up front, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius.”<sup>11</sup> To him truth is individual and internal. It is as if it springs from a fountain within the soul. One does not look outside for it, but within. To claim that one’s individual truth is equivalent to universal truth is the ultimate for Emerson, for it puts the individuality of a person at the center of all things. He gives full expression and completion to a trend that began earlier in modernity. As philosopher Charles Taylor explains:

Before the late eighteenth century no one thought that the difference between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way that is

<sup>10</sup>See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991) or Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). Taylor focuses on Romanticism while Gergen discusses both the history of the self in the Enlightenment tradition as well as the Romantic. Gergen does tend to talk as if there was no history before modernity in that he attributes all talk of commitment, purpose, passion, to Romanticism when the smallest knowledge of Christianity in the Middle Ages shows that this is simply false. This error skews his analysis a bit, but it is still a helpful account.

<sup>11</sup>*Essays, First Series*, printed in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 261.

*my way.* I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*. ...Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own.<sup>12</sup>

Identity in this view means individuality, uniqueness and subjectivity. There is no room here for the “given-ness” of identity in a premodern society. The most important feature of one’s identity is how that person differs from others. The great enemy then is society. For to live in society demands some measure of compromise and conformity to ensure peaceful coexistence, with all of the different and competing needs and desires of its citizens. But according to Emerson compromise and conformity are the very antithesis of individuality. Emerson states, “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.... The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.”<sup>13</sup> It is only those who create and express themselves in their own individuality and uniqueness that are considered worthy of respect. This also requires him to have a dim view of all those “masters” who have gone before and in this same essay he even writes, “History is an impertinence and an injury.”<sup>14</sup> For him, the past has nothing to offer; those who have gone before are of no account. But more than that, even those around us are of very little account. He warns any would-be disciple, “Friend, client, child, sickness, fear, want, charity, all knock at once at thy closet door, and say, — 'Come out unto us.' But keep thy state; come not into their confusion.”<sup>15</sup> Emerson is offering the counsel that the true individual should maintain their solitude, or their “state,” and not get mixed up with the

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<sup>12</sup>Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 28-29.

<sup>13</sup>Emerson, 261.

<sup>14</sup>Emerson, 270.

<sup>15</sup>Emerson, 273.

“confusion” of the friend or child with all of their need and fear and want.

This viewpoint was also characteristic of all Romantic literature of the time.

According to Lloyd Kramer of the University of North Carolina, ‘heroes’ of Romantic literature shared common traits:

1. The Romantic hero’s individualism is his or her most important trait,
2. Romantic heroes had to be different from the world of ordinary people.
3. Self-knowledge ultimately came through experience, never simply through books, education, or traditional social institutions.
4. The Romantic hero must express strong feelings and follow his impulses wherever they may lead.<sup>16</sup>

The individual who is true to his or her own uniqueness and who heeds the inner voice over against all other voices is the hero of this new grand narrative. Understanding is not just knowing nature’s laws, but awareness of one’s inner states and feelings. Truth and authenticity in this view result when one gives expressions to their feelings and acts on their desires.

Both Emerson and Kant held to the autonomy of the individual over against traditional roles and expectations. What Emerson and the romantics added to the grand narrative outlined by Kant was to assign a purpose to the individual, not in heroic deeds on behalf of others or of truth or of honor, but on behalf of herself or himself; the purpose was to live in pursuit of one’s uniqueness and individuality. Kant and Emerson stand as exemplars of the two strands of modernism; one focused attention on the autonomous self apart from tradition while the other turned the focus to inward beliefs and experiences to define that individual. Robert Bellah and others have called these two strands utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism, respectively, in their exploration of

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<sup>16</sup>From a lecture entitled, “The Meaning of the ‘Romantic Hero’” of the series, *European Thought and Culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, part I (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2001).

American character in the book, *Habits of the Heart*.<sup>17</sup> This work illustrates how dominant they still are in the way Americans think about themselves.

Kant and Emerson downgraded the value of society and tradition as the sources for identity and meaning in life. In society's place they have elevated the lone individual, celebrating the powers and abilities of that one to throw off societal helps and to live as the rugged individual, only by his or her own resources. The individual, in the absence of social answers to life problems, was to create his or her own answers, either from reason or sentiment, which would provide the foundation for a sense of identity, purpose and meaning in life. Current consumer behavior traces its roots back to Romanticism's obsession with the individual and that individual's liberation through the consumption of experiences.<sup>18</sup> But ideas alone could not birth consumer capitalism. There were also seismic economic developments with dramatic consequences for society and an individual's place with it.

### **You Say You Want a Revolution**

Given that Emerson lived during the Industrial Revolution, a reaction against uniformity is not surprising. During his lifetime, which follows immediately upon Kant's (Emerson was born in 1803 and Kant died in 1804), he saw the creation of the steam locomotive, Portland cement, matches, the typewriter, microphone, sewing machine,

<sup>17</sup>Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swindler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1985; Perennial Library, 1986.

<sup>18</sup>See Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). Walter Brueggemann sees the same connection between the Enlightenment's ideal of the autonomous individual and consumerism. He writes, "That autonomy in knowledge, moreover, produced autonomy in action and ethics as well, so that the individual becomes the norm for what is acceptable. The end result is a self-preoccupation that ends in self-indulgence and that drives religion to narcissistic catering and consumerism, to limitless seeking after well-being and pleasure on one's own terms, without regard to any "other" in the community." *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among the Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 27.

photography, wrenches, refrigeration, the revolver, Morse code, rubber vulcanization, bicycles, facsimile machines, and dishwasher, to name but a few. A close look at this list of developments compared to the ones listed above will reveal that these innovations were increasingly technological in nature. Advancements in science were applied to specific problems in new inventions. The Scientific Revolution which began in the sixteenth century led directly to the Industrial Revolution as scientific developments were translated into technological ones. Manual labor was increasingly replaced by machines, which did the work more continually and efficiently. These developments transformed the nature of production. Goods formerly produced in the home came to be made in factories, which in turn put great stress upon traditional family structures. Goods were produced faster and more cheaply in a factory. This development resulted in a surplus of goods where there had not been one before. There was also a cumulative effect in that the mass production of goods allowed ever-new products to be invented and produced. These changes transformed traditional agricultural economies into industrial ones in Europe and America. Moreover, this economic revolution translated into societal transformation as more and more people moved into cities. The people newly amassed in urban areas created larger and larger markets for the consumption of these available goods.

Two specific technological advances multiplied the expansion of markets: the railroad and the telegraph. As information and products moved ever more quickly from town to town, or (especially in the U.S.) from state to state, a national market was created, calling for more products and more consumption.

The nature of human labor could not remain untouched by this whirlwind of change. Work moved from being human-centered to being machine-centered as a result

of continuous-process manufacturing. The clock rather than the task set the time and the pace of work. As the individual tasks of production were divided and subdivided in the quest for efficiency, work became more routinized and repetitive. Consumption became the release and reward for such work. This shift signals a change in focus from production to consumption.

The changes did not leave the individual, as imagined by intellectuals, free to define their own identity and future. Instead, it immersed most people in the class system created by the Industrial Revolution. A large middle class was created and thus the population became divided into the upper, middle and lower classes. These classes seemed to be as durable and constraining as categories of earlier times had been. The important factor in identity and social standing was the level of income.

The new constant, however, is change. The pervasiveness of this reality stands in the starker contrast to premodern life. Whereas, the premodern person enjoyed a sense of durability and security in their identity, the modern person experiences a sense of unrelenting change. Tradition has given way to transformation as the shaping reality of the age. The changing environment demands that the individual define him- or herself ever anew, over against the new situation. These definitions must be made without the aid of the traditional roles and answers of social and religious conventions. But that does not mean that there are no ready-made answers at hand. The market stepped into the void.

## ***Consumer Capitalism***

The Industrial Revolution gave way to its successor, consumer capitalism. Somewhere around 1900 the center of gravity shifted from production to consumption in

the mind of the public. Before 1900 the attention of business had been chiefly on the product and its efficient production. Social critique tended to be on the inhumanity of that production. After 1900 business focused more and more attention on the marketing and promotion of their company and its products. One indication of this shift was a piece of trademark legislation passed by Congress in 1905, in which a brand legally became “a name, term, or design—or a combination of these elements that is intended to clarify identity and differentiate a seller’s products.”<sup>19</sup> Brands have since become big business.

This shift in focus from production to consumption can be demonstrated in many arenas. In 1949 Leo Lowenthal wrote an essay in which he traced the development of stories in popular magazines that profiled notable people. He concluded that in the early part of the century the people chosen and highlighted were those who built bridges, dams and companies. These were “heroes of production.” As time passed the profiles were increasingly of movie stars, sport celebrities, and other entertainment notables. These were no longer heroes of production, but “heroes of consumption.” He went on to observe that even where politicians were featured, attention was on the hobbies and private personality of the subject, things only tangentially related to his or her job.<sup>20</sup>

## ***Advertising and Brands***

The transition to consumer capitalism was made possible not only by continually increasing levels of surplus but also by new technologies for marketing. It was in 1900 that voice was first transmitted by radio. It was also during this time that America was

<sup>19</sup>James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 18.

<sup>20</sup>David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 113.

experiencing what Daniel Boorstin has called the ‘Graphic Revolution.’<sup>21</sup> There had been great advances in technologies that captured images, i.e. cameras and film, and reproduced them. New products could be pitched more vividly over the radio and through images than was possible before. And the combination of sound and image in the television was just around the corner.

Advertising was an inevitable consequence of the new technologies of travel, communication, and reproduction. Manufacturers used these technologies to sell their goods to the new markets that these technologies opened up. The proliferation of new goods created the activity of shopping. The word “shopping” only entered the lexicon in the middle 1800s in London when stores had regular re-stockable inventory. Thus it is a result of the surplus of goods that resulted from the all of the inventions, which thus transformed the nature of production.

However, commerce, the process of buying and selling, was transformed as well by the new surplus and the technologies that created a national market. Up until this time, transactions were largely face-to-face dealings that were sealed with a handshake, which represented a mutual trust. With the separation of seller and buyer, buyers often faced great variation in the quantity and quality of the products they purchased. Dissatisfaction with poor quality or less-than-promised quantity led to distrust. Manufacturers responded in two ways: packaging and branding. Packaging, which really took off once paper could be sealed and printed upon, meant consistent quantity and quality. Branding of products with nationally recognized names arose as a way for customers to trust a product, even a new product, apart from any relationship. As Francis

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<sup>21</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1961, 1992), 13.

Fukuyama describes it,

These brand names provided the certainty and familiarity that customers had grown to expect from their local merchants. For millions of consumers in rural and small-town America, brand names meant that they could safely carry on anonymous transactions with someone they never met yet expect to receive quality merchandise. Branding was, in effect, a type of information technology before the transistor: it conveyed assurance of quality and established trust between buyers and sellers who had no other means of communicating with one another.<sup>22</sup>

Fukuyama explains that brands filled a need, i.e. the buying and selling in uncertain conditions, created by changing economic and social conditions. Consequently, the brands became the intermediaries between producers and consumers. Brands then took on a life of their own. With factories turning out countless products and widgets that were identical, one company's widget might be indistinguishable from another's widget to the customer. Brands thus became the carriers of distinction and difference between otherwise identical products. Advertisers first touted their brand as the one with the most certain quality and consistency. Soon, however, they claimed other traits for their brand.

Advertisers implicitly and explicitly made promises that the purchase of their product would deliver status, meaning, confidence, a life of adventure, meaning, comfort, happiness, sexual fulfillment, meaningful relationships, etc. They quickly learned the power of selling the sizzle instead of the steak. This shift was not an automatic one. The customer had to be tutored in the new ways of thinking about buying and evaluating brands and their products. The task of the advertiser was to create a consumer out of a customer. And this is exactly what happened in the 1920s.

*Printers' Ink*, a prominent journal for advertisers in the twenties, summed up this goal when it said, “modern machinery …made it not only possible but imperative that the

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<sup>22</sup>Francis Fukuyama, “E-Commerce and the Challenge of Trust,” posted 2001. Available online at [www.ml.com/woml/forum/ecommerce1.htm](http://www.ml.com/woml/forum/ecommerce1.htm) (accessed 6/19/2005).

masses should live lives of comfort and leisure; that the future of business lay in its ability to *manufacture customers* as well as products.”<sup>23</sup> The new economic situation demanded that businesses had to focus not only on producing objects for people to buy, but increasingly on producing a customer who would want what they were producing. Formerly, customers, who were otherwise known as workers in the factory, would buy new things as they were needed and would evaluate products on the basis of their intrinsic merits, i.e. their quality, features, capacity, etc. The new goal of business was consumers, who would buy products as they were desired and who would evaluate them on their extrinsic merits, i.e. their fashion, taste, status-giving function, etc. A *worker* would buy a new suit because his other one wore out. A *consumer*, on the other hand, would buy a new suit if wearing the old one would disadvantage him in the workplace.

Advertisers played upon the fear of falling behind and the desire to get ahead as they boldly proclaimed that through the use of their product, success would surely follow. At first, these ads were largely directed toward men. However, by 1929 more than 80 percent of the family’s purchases were executed by women, so advertisers turned their attention toward them to inculcate the new values of mass production and mass consumption.<sup>24</sup> Stuart Ewen notes that “Throughout the twenties, a noticeable proportion of magazine ads directed at women depicted them looking into mirrors.”<sup>25</sup> These ads projected a view of the world where people were constantly under the relentless and unforgiving scrutiny of others. One could never be too careful about one’s appearance and self-presentation. The message was clear: success, value and worth were secured by

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<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977 [1976]), 53.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 177.

purchasing items that other people would find attractive and worthy of praise and reward. One writer wrote in *Printers' Ink*, "advertising helps to keep the masses dissatisfied with their mode of life, discontented with *ugly things* around them. Satisfied customers are not as profitable as discontented ones."<sup>26</sup> Dissatisfaction with one's current lot became a distinct and indelible feature of consumer capitalism. Advertisers did all within their power to breed dissatisfaction and then they would turn around and assure the consumer that satisfaction could be attained by purchasing their product.

The upward spiral of production and consumption stalled at the end of the twenties, with the Great Depression, and remained derailed until after the Second World War, as commodities became scarce and rationed. However, immediately following the war the process began anew, and with a fury. As Stuart Ewen succinctly puts it, "Combining the social and technological developments of the twenties with the component of economic boom that characterized the fifties, the postwar era was one in which mass consumption erupted, for increasing numbers, into a full-blown style of life."<sup>27</sup> This new style of life had its own space to flourish and develop—the suburbs. The suburbs ballooned across the country. They were an idealized space where each individual could have their own open space in which to be fully themselves. The fifties saw the full advent of the suburbs, the freeway system, and television. All of which contributed mightily to the full consummation of consumer capitalism.

In 1955 retail analyst Victor Lebow declared with religious fervor:

Our enormously productive economy...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption.... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 207-08.

rate.<sup>28</sup>

As noted earlier the death of tradition was one of the hallmarks of modernity. It is evident at this point how consumerism is completely consonant with that position. There is no room for tradition or anything ‘old’ when all is burned up to make space for the ‘new.’ The reaction against tradition and traditional things, which has become a reflexive attitude for post-Enlightenment people, turned out to be very useful in fostering a consumer economy. Businesses joined intellectuals in calling for people to cast off the old and adopt (or purchase) the new. In so doing they adapted a philosophical position to an economic end. In much the same way, advertisers focused on consumers as individuals who could define their own unique identity and lifestyle through purchased goods.

The 1960s stand as a great watershed in American society. The counter-culture that had always resisted the mass market became the mainstream. An entire generation, known as the baby-boomers, came of age immersed in both the culture of abundance as well as the idealism of the individual. This generation made a mission of throwing off the old way of life. Robert Putnam, who is a Professor of Public Policy at Harvard, comments on the disconnectedness of this generation from institutions, traditions, and roles:

Boomers were slow to marry and quick to divorce. Both marriage and parenthood became choices, not obligations. Although 96 percent of boomers were raised in a religious tradition, 58 percent abandoned that tradition, and only about one in three of the apostates have returned. In their work life they are less comfortable in bureaucracies, less loyal to a particular firm, more insistent upon autonomy.... They put great emphasis on individualism and tolerance for diversity and rejected

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<sup>28</sup>Quoted by Rodney Clapp, ed., *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and Consumer Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 189.

traditional social roles.<sup>29</sup>

Boomers had the economic prosperity that allowed a greater freedom to divorce. Their behavior and outlook also adapted to the pill that allowed sexuality to be separated from the institution of the family. Liberation from all forms of oppression became the motivation for this new generation of Americans. They saw the old institutions as the source of oppression, whether religious, political, or social. It was this attitude, the loss of the confidence in progress and the disillusionment with institutions, which was passed to the emerging generations. A prime medium of this message is television. Author Bill McKibben wrote, “The greatest story of the TV age is the transition from the fifties to the sixties—the demolition of the last ordered American ‘way of life.’ And TV tells us this story incessantly.”<sup>30</sup> Younger generations could not help but get this message.

However, the rejection of old ways of solving problems creates a vacuum that must be filled. In the sixties many great ideals were floated—self-expression, self-determination, freethinking, communal living, etc. In the end, however, the ideal that won out was the belief in consumption as the mode of expression and liberation. Consumerism rushed in to fill the void left by the rejection of traditional answers and authorities. The next chapter will investigate the forms that these new answers take. Suffice it to say, consumer capitalism became the only game in town.

The social world has been dramatically impacted by the logic of consumerism. Economic concerns and considerations have become king-of-the-hill. All other institutions and systems now answer to the demands of the market and many have remade

<sup>29</sup>Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 258.

<sup>30</sup>Bill McKibben, *The Age of Missing Information* (New York: Plume, 1992), 176.

themselves in the image of the market.<sup>31</sup> Even the presidency of the United States has become a product to be marketed and bought as Joe McGinniss demonstrated in his book, *The Selling of the President 1968*.<sup>32</sup> Rodney Clapp has argued that Modernity is that period in history that has allowed for only two public institutions: the state and the market.<sup>33</sup> These two gained a monopoly as relationships with God and others became privatized. There is no question that, especially early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state far overstepped its bounds. Clapp sees the reaction against the overweening presence of the state is what accounts for the appeal of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. What is so significant is that “when Thatcher and Reagan sought leverage for their assault on government, they turned to the other public institution of modernity, the market.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, Thatcher could say, “There is no such thing as society.”<sup>35</sup> For in capitalist theory there is no room for society, only the individual in the marketplace. This trend continues in the presidency of George W. Bush as he emphasizes accountability, goals and resources. Thus, “modern persons are increasingly defined in all our relationships or endeavors as consumers,” Clapp concludes, and continues, “We are no longer ‘students’ but ‘educational consumers,’ no longer ‘worshippers’ but ‘church shoppers,’ no longer ‘patients’ but ‘health consumers.’”<sup>36</sup> Every cultural tune is being

<sup>31</sup>“The melting of solids led to the progressive untying of economy from its traditional political, ethical, and cultural entanglements. It sedimented a new order, defined primarily in economic terms. That new order was to be more ‘solid’ than the orders it replaced, because—unlike them—it was immune to the challenge from non-economic action. Most political and moral levers capable of shifting or reforming the new order have been broken or rendered too short, weak or otherwise inadequate for the task. Not that the economic order, once entrenched, will have colonized, re-educated and converted to its ways the rest of social life; that order came to dominate the totality of human life because whatever else might have happened in that life has been rendered irrelevant and ineffective as far as the relentless and continuous reproduction of that order was concerned.” Bauman, 4.

<sup>32</sup>Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President 1968* (New York: Trident, 1968).

<sup>33</sup>Rodney Clapp, in the “Introduction,” *The Consuming Passion*, 7.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Bauman, 30.

<sup>36</sup>Clapp, 8.

transposed into an economic key. James B. Twitchell sums it up when he writes, “Commercialism is driving popular culture, and popular culture is driving almost everything else.”<sup>37</sup>

He also argues that in our modern world, which is depleted of traditional and religious meanings, young people turn toward the consumption of things to find meaning. This stands to reason, after all, as Charles Taylor plainly put it, “In order to live at all in this world, we have to impose some order on it.”<sup>38</sup> Twitchell explains that advertising, “branding, packaging, fashion, and even the act of shopping itself are now the central meaning-making acts in our postmodern world.”<sup>39</sup> These actions are the primary activities of consumer capitalism, or consuming commercialism.

Premodern people had their position or place in society; modern people were assigned to a class; postmodern people have tribes. According to Twitchell, “the tribe you affiliate yourself with probably has more to do with the brand of refrigerator you just bought last Tuesday than with your income, age, education, job, bloodline, religion, or country club.”<sup>40</sup> Advanced consumer capitalism now pervades our sense of self, our relationships, our values, and our goals. Vincent Miller’s definition of a consumer culture is an apt summation of American culture: “Consumer societies are societies in which consumption plays an important role in establishing social identity and solidarity.”<sup>41</sup> No longer does our place within a family, society, or institution, definitively carry meaning and a sense of who we are. Today, it is through the buying of

<sup>37</sup>James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 46.

<sup>38</sup>Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 472.

<sup>39</sup>James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 14.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>41</sup>Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 30.

brand-name objects that one defines oneself to others. The buying of branded objects expresses the self-understanding of the individual. More than this, it actually defines the individual in the eyes of others. This is wonderfully illustrated by one's woman's experience:

One Saturday I went shopping with my teenage daughter. I needed a dress for a party the next week. I saw a very attractive dress, black, a daring cut, and with silver sequins. I was very excited until I tried it on. Dejectedly I had to tell my daughter that I just couldn't take it. It just wasn't me. My daughter responded with gentle mockery, "But Mom, that isn't the point. With that dress you would really *be* somebody."<sup>42</sup>

Fashion has always had a role in society as the sign of status and significance. What is new is that fashion functions not only as the sign of status but its very substance. In other words, fashion creates status. In today's economy fashion is not just the styles presented by top designers in Paris, Tokyo, or Milan, but also the bringing together of brands and products by the average person. The idea of fashion has been stretched and extended far beyond the realm of clothing to include what you drive and eat, where you live, shop, relax, socialize and vacation. It is not just a *style* that is being purchased but a *lifestyle*. This topic will be taken up later where it will be evident lifestyle is also what connects us to others in our post-traditional order.

So many areas of our society can profitably seen and better understood in the light of this history from a traditional order to a post-traditional one, where consumerism has stepped in to fill the void created by the religion, tradition, and metaphysics. Murray Milner, Jr. has analyzed the culture of teenagers in our society by using the tools of sociology and has found this same pattern. He found that the more teenagers live in self-contained environments away from the rest of society, without economic or political

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<sup>42</sup>Quoted in Gergen, 139.

power or status in the larger community of adults (i.e. at school), the more they use the commodities of consumer culture to structure their social lives.<sup>43</sup> The less that adults create order and norms that enable the teenagers to achieve status and gain the esteem in their eyes, the more that they create their own status systems through consumption, so that the latest style or cell phone or music becomes the marker for who is in and who is out, who is a cool and who is a freak. The world of teenagers is a microcosm of the larger American culture. There are those who celebrate this development and believe that it is freeing and emancipatory.<sup>44</sup> This opinion seems to be driven by the ideology of postmodernism as it remains blind to empirical evidence, which suggests that it also promotes a more competitive and predatory environment, where those who are ‘different’ are easy targets to be vilified and ostracized.

In summary, modernity can be seen as that era in history when war was declared on tradition, including religious tradition, in the name of the liberation of the individual. In the process, the war was widened to encompass anything that limits the individual’s freedom. The end result was a vastly different world with a vastly different resident. As Craig M. Gay writes,

Modernity’s ultimate product is thus the individual who has been liberated to construct him or herself, but only within the confines of the here and now, and only by means of consuming the fruits of technological production, and only in the privacy of his or her own home, and only in such a way as not to disturb the peace by impinging materially upon his or her neighbor’s equally autonomous self-construction—the modern consumer.<sup>45</sup>

Consumer capitalism is then modernism in its full fruit and flower. Yet, its rise over the

<sup>43</sup>Murray Milner, Jr., *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 25.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>45</sup>Craig M. Gay, “Sexualists Without Heart: Contemporary Consumerism in Light of the Modern Project,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 35.

last century has created a world that is markedly different from the modernity of the Industrial Revolution that it is coming to be seen as an era all its own. Some call it postmodern. The word ‘postmodern’ means different things in different contexts, but very often it can be profitably understood as advanced consumer capitalism.<sup>46</sup>

Having traced the development of modernity, this work will now look at some of the prevailing conditions of advanced consumer capitalism, especially noting the themes the Gay alludes to in the quote above—the construction of the self by each individual through the means of consuming the fruits of technological production.

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<sup>46</sup>Frederic Jameson has called late capitalism “a literal translation” of postmodernism, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), xxi.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE FEATURES OF CONSUMER CULTURE

The last chapter traced the rise of consumer capitalism from its origins in the scientific and industrial revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to the utter domination of the market in the 20<sup>th</sup>. This chapter offers a topical look at some of the prominent features of consumer culture. Such topics include investigating the effects on individuals who live in a culture that rejects tradition as well as identifying the dominate symbols, practices and values of this culture. The next chapter will explore the particular form that identity takes in consumer culture.

#### ***Life without Tradition and Certainty***

Henry Ford may have best summed up the spirit of the age when he said, “History is more or less bunk. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today.”<sup>1</sup>

The era of modernity witnessed the decline and fall of tradition as a category that could serve as a compass for individuals and society. The modern consensus about the role of tradition is that “history is bunk.” History and tradition do remain, but they remain as a resource for current ventures—more as something to be taken in bits and pieces than swallowed whole. In the area of religion, the individual, who is defined as the consumer, looks to the past, or to a tradition such as Christianity, as a resource more than as a religion. That is to say, fewer people are converting to Christianity as a complete system. They are more likely to convert the parts of that tradition, which

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<sup>1</sup>In the *Chicago Tribune*, 25 May 1916, quoted in Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 131.

connect with their history and preferences, to their own use.

To use a metaphor, tradition could be likened to a ship on the ocean. Some Christians today and most people before the Enlightenment saw it as a vessel that would bear one through the world and beyond. Today, however, the ship is seen as a wreck on the shore, no longer capable of carrying passengers anywhere. But it still is a treasure of raw materials—wood planking, barrels, navigation equipment, rope, canvas, etc.—out of which religious people can build their own craft as they make their unique way in the world. Given this approach, if tradition is to be of value it must be removed from its previous place and be modified and adopted by each individual.

The psychological effect of this new state of affairs is very unsettling. Certainty has been sequestered and doubt made the handmaid of knowledge. Suspicion is made a virtue, conviction a vice. Consider a recent Harvard undergraduate who said in his graduation oration: “Among my classmates, however, I believe that there is one idea, one sentiment, which we have all acquired at some point in our Harvard careers; and that, ladies and gentlemen, is, in a word, confusion.” The graduate-orator said the same year:

They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true.<sup>2</sup>

This student had learned well the lesson that any ideas or concepts that were taught to them were by definition somebody else’s, and therefore, should not be trusted. (Kant would be proud.) The rationale is that “Truth” is just a collection of cultural and linguistic conventions, and thus, of themselves, unable to be true in any universal sense. Truth is what the individual constructs it to be. The result of this thinking is a deep and

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<sup>2</sup>This was quoted by Robert N. Bellah, et. al. in *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 43-44.

profound uncertainty that pervades all ventures.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes the effect of this uncertainty on individuals in contemporary society: “The present day uncertainty is a powerful *individuating* force. It divides instead of uniting.”<sup>3</sup> Not being able to rely on tradition, on history, on the institutions which convey the past and preserve it, simply because they convey and preserve it, the individual is thrown upon his or her own devices to construct a world of one’s own devising.

The blockbuster movie, *The Matrix*, gives exquisite expression to the postmodern mood and mind. The main character is a young man called, Neo, who is looking for answers to life’s deeper questions. Full of symbolism, “Neo,” meaning “new” cannot gain from anything old. The plot revolves around the question, “What is the Matrix?” which in the context of the movie is equivalent to the question, what is this life all about? In his quest for answers he looks for a man named Morpheus, only to find out that Morpheus has been looking for him. The dialog from their first meeting goes like this:

MORPHEUS: Let me tell you why you are here. You have come because you know something. What you know you can’t explain but you can feel it. You’ve felt it your whole life, felt that something is wrong with the world. You don’t know what, but it is there like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is that feeling that brought you to me. Do you know what I am talking about?

NEO: The Matrix?

MORPHEUS: Do you want to know what it is?

Neo swallows hard and nods.

MORPHEUS: The Matrix is everywhere; it’s all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

NEO: What truth?

MORPHEUS: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind. Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to

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<sup>3</sup>Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 160, 148.

see it for yourself.<sup>4</sup>

The feeling that Neo and the postmodern consumer have is that something is wrong with the world. That the world that is lived and experienced is not all there is. Reality, or as it is called in this movie, the Matrix, is not what it should be and is not what it seems. As Morpheus explains that it is the “world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.” The world in which they live is not real, no matter where you look. Notice the wonderful juxtaposition of what you see out your window and what you see on your television. Normally, the former would be considered real while the latter the fake. Yet they are swept together with everything else into the trash bin of the false, along with work, going to church and paying one’s taxes. The institutions of the marketplace (‘work’), the church and the government (‘when you pay your taxes’) are just as immaterial. In the service of institutions and social interactions everyone is a slave. Freedom exists outside them all. Emerson would have been pleased. No tradition or institution can bear meaning and truth. Because they cover it up rather than reveal it. The remainder of the movie then revolves around Neo’s next question, “Who am I?”—The question of identity. In this way, Neo is the postmodern consumer. The answer to the meaning of life is the question of one’s individual identity.

One convinced postmodernist named Arthur Kroker describes the psychological mood of living in postmodern culture as one of *panic* and freefall that stems from the “disappearance of *external* standards of public conduct … and the dissolution of the *internal* foundations of identity.”<sup>5</sup> The loss of external anchors leads to the crumbling of the internal foundations of identity, because the two are intricately connected. The

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<sup>4</sup>*The Matrix* (Warner, 1999), rated R, written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Veith, 82.

radical change in social conditions from premodern to modern to postmodern, and the concurrent rejection of traditional, religious, and communal answers to life questions, leave individuals with no solid ground on which they can stand, in order to define the world or themselves. The result is a self who confronts the world and others only as a solitary individual, an atom of existence. In atomic science, it is individual particle that matters not the relationships to other particles. The result is freefall. This can be clearly seen in the lyrics of a young, female punk rocker, which sings, “I belong to the Blank Generation. I have no beliefs. I have no community, tradition, or anything like that. I am lost in this vast, vast world. I belong nowhere. I have absolutely no identity.”<sup>6</sup> Artists are usually better at expressing the deep truths of a society while the general population just keeps going on. So the question arises, how do they keep going on?

### ***The Individual as Society***

Robert Kegan, senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has analyzed the psychological struggle of living under this postmodern assumption that tradition is empty. It is empty in that it can provide no ready-made or proven answers. All traditional answers, on this view, must be scrutinized and selectively adopted only if they seem relevant to the individual. He calls living under these assumptions “the mental demands of modern life.” What he describes is the disintegration of life and its meaning. This is how he sums up the situation, “The essence of today’s pluralistic, privatistic, individualistic, and secular modernity is to fragment the mental monolith of Tradition. As a result... we do not find ourselves suspended in a communal medium that holds and

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 72.

nourishes us.”<sup>7</sup> The great authority of “Tradition” gives way to its opposite—the plurality of individuals who believe only in private goals and goods, with no hope or regard for public goods, either religious or secular.

In the same way the postmodern consumer lives without a “communal medium.” In the premodern world, and to some extent the modern, men and women could assume a coherent worldview, and with it roles and responsibilities in society that were pre-existing. Stepping into such roles provided one with an orientation in the world, a sense of who you were, and how you fit with others. It also told you how you were to behave and interact. The demands of living in a world without pre-existing roles and forms are extraordinarily heavy for the contemporary individual. Kegan puts it well when he writes,

The mental burden of modern life may be nothing less than the extraordinary cultural demand that each person, in adulthood, create internally an order of consciousness comparable to that which ordinarily would only be found at the level of a community’s collective intelligence. This amounts to the expectation that faithful adherents themselves become priests and priestesses; or, that the acculturated become cultures unto themselves. We grieve the “loss of community” we take to be a condition of modern life in large part because it is profoundly lonely. We feel lonely at the level of our own souls.<sup>8</sup>

The mental burden of our life, the task that we must undertake, is that we rise above the level of merely assuming pre-existing arrangements of roles, identities and responsibilities, since the traditional forms have been rejected or replaced. Our task, given by the contemporary situation, is to rise to the next level where we create the roles and identities that we will play and assume. Previously this task was not given to individuals, as individuals, but was carried on by the institutions as a whole. For

<sup>7</sup>Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 105.

<sup>8</sup>Kegan, 134. See also Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 8-9 and 48.

example, the Church with a capital ‘c’ would tell the story, would offer the symbols, and would define the roles of priest and laity. In the present situation, however, believers do not follow the directives of a priest; they must become their own priest and decide for themselves. Douglas Coupland expresses this understanding in his novel entitled, *Generation X*, which popularized the generational label, coined the word, Me-ism. He defined this neologism as “a search by an individual, in the absence of training in traditional tenets, to formulate a personally tailored religion.”<sup>9</sup> Those who have been fully inducted into the higher values and finer things of a culture must now choose for themselves what values to hold and to live by and what things to consider beautiful, worthy or repugnant.

To put this in different terms one could say that to be postmodern is to realize that you live in the matrix where everything is arbitrary. There is no compass or map. The individual must decide what is meaningful, or worthwhile, or good, since answers to these questions cannot come from ‘arbitrary,’ or humanly-created, institutions. Each man and woman is an island. As Kegan notes that is a lonely place to be. Further complicating the issue is the fact that he sees evidence that suggests that not even half of the population has developed the level of thinking to be able to do this, and therefore, it is ‘over our heads.’

In Kegan’s view all arenas of contemporary life demand this higher level of thinking. One of those areas is work or employment. He comments: “Any distillation of the contemporary literature on work would surely begin with the claim upon us to *invent* or *own* our jobs. We are told we must come to see that ‘your job belongs to you,’ ‘you

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<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Steve Rabey, *In Search of Authentic Faith: How Emerging Generations Are Transforming the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Watermark Press, 2001), 43.

have some control over your work,’ ‘your job is part of who you are.’”<sup>10</sup> Jobs can no longer be accepted and accomplished as a matter of course. They must now be connected to who we are.<sup>11</sup> Who we are becomes the driving theme and question not only in our work. Kegan’s observation probably needs to be qualified a bit, as the ability for work to be controlled and transformed is far more applicable to those who work with information. A day-laborer who picks avocados does not have much opportunity to “own their work.” Nevertheless, for the millions of information workers he is undoubtedly correct.

Kegan observes that there are almost as many Americans who participate in formal activities whose purpose is self-improvement such as therapy, support groups, or formal education as there are Americans that work. He concludes from this:

This striking fact is testimony to the real work of the modern world. In the modern world, as in the traditional world, the person labors. But in the modern world labor is carried out largely on behalf of oneself (and one’s private associations) rather than as an expression of one’s membership in a communal or tribal whole. And because the modern world expects of each adult the capacity for personal autonomy and authority, the self is not only a laborer, it is an area of labor (we “work on ourselves”). *The self itself becomes a project.*<sup>12</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

The self itself becomes a project, or even *the* project. Postmodern people build on this project through work, education, relationships, self-reflection, or therapy.

<sup>10</sup>Kegan, 154.

<sup>11</sup>Bauman agrees: “Stripped of its eschatological trappings and cut off from its metaphysical roots, work has lost the centrality which it was assigned in the galaxy of values dominant in the era of solid modernity and heavy capitalism. ...Instead, work has acquired—alongside other life activities—a mainly aesthetic significance. It is expected to be gratifying by and in itself, rather than be measured by the genuine or putative effects it brings to one’s brothers and sisters in humanity or to the might of the nation and country, let alone the bliss of future generations. Only a few people—and then only seldom—can claim privilege, prestige or honor, pointing to the importance and common benefit of the work they perform.” Bauman, 139.

<sup>12</sup>Kegan, 234. Kenneth Gergen has also noted this trend. He adds the insight that much of this labor and packaging of the self is done for economic reasons: “The possibility of ersatz being has also encouraged the development of industries for *identity production*. Adult-education curricula, educational extension programs, technical schools, and home studies programs are by now unremarkable. More interesting is the mushrooming of personal packaging enterprises—organizations such as career-counseling firms, designed to construct one’s identity in ways that are marketable.” Gergen, 184.

To use another metaphor one could say that the task that is put on people today is that each one should be an artist whose work is one's own self. Just as contemporary art is often done as a collage with all sorts of materials—no longer oil on canvas, but a swath of silk, some glossy magazine images, a couple of pieces of rusty rebar, a compact disc and some hand prints all thrown together—so each person is called upon to use whatever materials happen to be at hand and to form them, with all creativity, into the current version of themselves. A more palpable example can be found on television. Whether on MTV or the evening news it is the relentless succession of unrelated images that forms the content of our viewing. This image of collage captures a great deal of what it looks like to shape a personal identity in this postmodern world.

### ***TV and the Mall***

There can be no account of contemporary culture that does not give some attention to the role of television, so important is it. Numerous studies have shown that the “boob tube” is the way that most people spend a great deal of their time, gather their information about the world, and formulate their attitudes and morals through imitation. The television is the means that people use to find out about other forms of media: books, movies, magazines, websites, etc. Moreover, this is the avenue through which millions and millions of Americans learn of new products and services and are convinced of the importance of using them. It is also the main source for heroes to imitate, which are largely celebrities of great fame and fortune. These beautiful celebrities are offered up for viewers to identify with in their relationships of love and friendship and in their

interesting lives of adventure. This identification is a key mode of identity today.<sup>13</sup>

Identity is never just a matter of how one sees one's self and one's own life, but of relationships with others, and of how one is seen. Television has transformed this too. Lauren Langman has perceptively analyzed the transformation of how we perceive the others because of the influence of television:

In the age of television, we learn to see Others as if our eye were a camera. Role-taking and –making are less based on words than images. Taking the role of the Other is now to imagine that we are being seen via camera by the larger audience of home viewers. The audiences, persons or groups to which self-presentations are now directed may not exist in reality, but in hyper-reality.

He notes that previously when people would try to see themselves through the eyes of others, they would imagine actual people who might see them. Now, we imagine ourselves to be in front of an audience of strangers as in a commercial, movie or TV program. Langman continues: “Thus the use of a product, driving a \_\_\_\_\_ car, drinking a \_\_\_\_\_ beer or wearing \_\_\_\_\_ clothes brings recognition not only by those in clear view, but by millions of viewers out there in television land.”<sup>14</sup> Thus the products people buy, the clothes they wear, the gear they carry, is purchased and presented to the public of

<sup>13</sup>Television presents us with a multitude of perspectives; far more than one could assimilate. Psychologists and sociologists have tried to summarize the effects this has on the self. The postmodern person has thus been called “the saturated self” by Kenneth Gergen (*The Saturated Self*) and the “minimal self” by Nicholas Lasch (*The Minimal Self* (NY: Norton, 1984)). Gergen’s term derives from his understanding that life in the postmodern world is one where people are bombarded by people with viewpoints different from their own. As they try to adjust and incorporate these new views into their conceptual world they become overwhelmed and ‘saturated,’ or ‘populated’ as he puts it. TV surely does this more effectively than any other technology. Lasch on the other hand believes that the instability and flux of the world of commodities, which by nature are disposable, causes “identity [to] become uncertain and problematical.” (32) Under this uncertainty the self retreats to a minimum existence or to become a “minimal self.”

There is no need to choose between these perspectives since both factors are complementary. Both people and objects come and go in our lives with breathtaking rapidity, and nowhere faster than on Television. A better moniker for the self which inhabits this environment is best called, a “liquid self,” to adapt a phrase from Bauman. Liquid is by nature without its own form. The self must be readily adaptable to all new forms and forces, to follow the latest trend, to be pliable to the latest advertising campaign that seeks to stir desires and awaken fantasies, to make choices and avoid consequences. This is the self that can best get by, even if it is the most precarious.

<sup>14</sup>Lauren Langman, “Neon Cages: Shopping for Subjectivity” in *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption*, ed. Rob Shields, in The International Library of Sociology (New York: Routledge, 1992), 56.

fellow TV watchers who will recognize the styles and brands and what they mean. It is the desire for recognition that links TV and shopping. Moreover, it has also seeped beneath the surface so it is not just the products but also the actions of a person that are done for recognition. Or as put by Langman, “As late capitalism has become an amusement society, personal conduct has itself become a spectacle, a performance to bring attention to the person for the sake of attention or means to another goal.”<sup>15</sup> The desire for 15 minutes of fame is the desire for widespread recognition that makes a person important. Consider, in this connection, how Boorstin has defined a celebrity: *someone who is well known for being well known.* TV has become the mode of recognition. There is an intricate link between television and shopping.

Shopping has become the paradigmatic activity for expressing one’s choices and preferences. And the number of those choices has mushroomed. As recently as 1976 the average grocery store carried 9000 items, while the average today is 30,000.<sup>16</sup> However, the apex of shopping has to be the mall. It is not only the ultimate in seemingly infinite choices of products for purchase but it is also the center of so much entertainment. The extreme example would be the Mall of America in Minnesota, which contains its own amusement park. But malls all over America offer video arcades, playgrounds for children, concert stages, food courts and movie theaters.

The mall is not merely a collage of different entertainments, but a highly planned and integrated environment devoted solely to commercial consumption. This devotion leads mall owners to do all within their power to control the environment, from

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>16</sup>Dennis L. Okholm, “I Don’t Think We’re in Kansas Anymore, Toto! Postmodernism in Our Everyday Lives”, *Theology Matters: A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry*, Vol. 5 No. 4, Jul/Aug 1999, 2-3.

temperature to displays to rules about loitering, in order to encourage the shoppers to spend money. The aim of all of this control is to produce a dream-like world of fantasy, for that is what products both provide and fulfill in an amusement society. It is worth quoting Langman again as he describes these fantasy-filled boxes:

They exist as indoor worlds with atriums of plants and trees from faraway climes, marble fountains with multicolored light shows with lasers, holograms and strobes with backdrops of chrome waterfalls. The design and layout of malls attempt to create a utopia of consumption situated between a mythical past of the pre-automobile Main Street of Smalltown where one walked from store to store, and the future high-tech world of neon, holograms, lasers and space travel as malls come to resemble the space station of *2001*, the Starship Enterprise or high-tech future cities. They create nostalgic memories of neighborhood and lost community.<sup>17</sup>

The creation of fantasy is aimed at the fact that people do not predominately shop for products that will meet their needs or even their wants, but their desires. These are the desires of who they aspire to be, who they wish to be like, and who they desire to be with. Malls are built around this assumption and in this way they are the physical realization of the television advertisement. Just as TV is the mode of recognition, so malls are the mode of actualization. It is in the act of shopping that individuals participate in the narrative of consumer culture as they seek to define themselves through their purchases.

Shopping, at one and the same time, presumes freedom to be the chief value and activity in the culture and provides for its manifestation and expression. But the idea of freedom that it presumes and represents is a very specific and unique idea—freedom defined narrowly as choosing.

### ***Freedom (and Power) as Choosing***

As the focus of thinking in the modern era came to rest more and more on the

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<sup>17</sup>Langman, 48-49.

individual over and against society, the concept of freedom moved to center stage. As pointed out earlier for both Kant and Emerson, freedom came increasingly to be defined as being free from the expectations and duties of society and of the community. Whereas older ideas, such as those of Augustine and Aquinas, saw true freedom as the liberty to live life with God, in the modern and postmodern eras, freedom is defined as the freedom of choice. The older ideas saw true freedom as the freedom to choose God's will or to choose the Good, not just the act of choosing itself. Freedom was defined by the ends not the means. In the current climate of consumer culture this freedom has been identified with the freedom of the consumer always to have options and to the ability to choose between them. Bauman sums up the new situation when he writes, "Consumer choice is now a value in its own right; the activity of choosing matters more than what is being chosen, and the situations are praised or censured, enjoyed or resented depending on the range of choices on display."<sup>18</sup> Choice has become the chief good. The choice between opportunities of consumption is now the sole definition of the common good.

And yet there is a paradox inherent in this view of the world. It comes to light when one thinks through the logic of this view. If freedom is defined as choosing, then the full expression and manifestation of that freedom is when one makes a choice. Yet, a choice by its very nature is the selection of one possibility and the rejection of all others. Therefore, the act of choosing actually limits the choices. Choices are at once the goal of all activity and yet the enemy of that activity at the same time. As consumers seek self-fulfillment under these conditions, the result is that their choices become ephemeral. They try, even as they are making choices, to do so in a way that they are not bound to those choices in the future. Things are selected for the moment. They are taken up, only

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<sup>18</sup>Bauman, 87.

to be laid down again a moment later. It is worth quoting Bauman at length as he describes the experience of living life in this way:

Living in a world full of opportunities—each one more appetizing and alluring than the previous one, each ‘compensating for the last, and providing grounds for shifting towards the next—is an exhilarating experience. In such a world, little is predetermined, even less irrevocable. Few defeats are final, few if any mishaps irreversible; yet no victory is ultimate either. For the possibilities to remain infinite, none may be allowed to petrify into everlasting reality. They had better stay liquid and fluid and have a ‘use-by’ date attached, lest they render the remaining opportunities off-limits and nip the future adventure in the bud.... Living amidst apparently infinite chances (or at least among more chances than one can reasonably hope to try) offers the sweet taste of ‘freedom to become anybody’. This sweetness has a bitter after-taste, though, since while the ‘becoming’ bit suggests that nothing is over yet and everything lies ahead, the condition of ‘being somebody’ which that becoming is meant to secure, portends the umpire’s final, end-of-game whistle: ‘you are no more free when the end has been reached; you are not yourself when you have become somebody.’ The state of unfinishedness, incompleteness and underdetermination is full of risk and anxiety; but its opposite brings no unadulterated pleasure either, since it forecloses what freedom needs to stay open.<sup>19</sup>

Bauman here sounds the note that is the theme of his book, that the key feature of contemporary culture is fluidity, risk and anxiety. The era is so full of promise and pleasure but the fruit cannot be savored, as that would require lingering and reflection on choices made—something that one cannot afford if freedom must remain open and untethered. Some people find this rarefied air intoxicating.

A century ago the philosopher who has been called the ‘prophet of postmodernity’, Friedrich Nietzsche, wrote approvingly and with great celebration of just this kind of life. In a section called “Brief Habits” (295) he writes:

*Brief habits.*— I love brief habits... And one day its time is up: the good things part from me, not as something that has come to nauseate me—but peacefully and sated with me as I am with it, and as if we had reason to be grateful to each other and *thus* we shook hands to say farewell. Even then something new is waiting at the door, along with my faith—this indestructible fool and sage!—that this new discovery will be just right, and that this will be the last time. That is what

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 62.

happens to me with dishes, ideas, human beings, cities, poems, music, doctrines, ways of arranging the day, and lifestyles.—*Enduring* habits I hate, and I feel as if a tyrant had come near me and that the air I breathe had thickened when events take such a turn that it appears that they will inevitably give rise to enduring habits: for example, owing to an official position, constant association with the same people, a permanent domicile, or unique good health.<sup>20</sup>

While the powers of Nietzsche's pen might evoke great inspiration and aspiration in some people to pursue this kind of hedonistic life with full frenzy, it is not without its dark side either. He gives a nod to the possibility of the realization of this dark side when he continues, "More intolerable, to be sure, and the terrible par excellence would be for me a life entirely devoid of habits, a life that would demand perpetual improvisation. That would be my exile and my Siberia."<sup>21</sup> The current quest for absolute freedom (which has been promised in an advertisement for Absolut brand vodka) ends in the exile of the necessity of constant improvisation, not just for activities but also for identity.

Here the contrast with the older understandings of freedom and identity stand in stark contrast. Aristotle or Aquinas saw habits as the source, rather than the enemy, of freedom. The creation of a habit actually freed the person from having to focus on a certain activity and exert their will and energy to accomplish a task; it could become "second nature." Thus, the will and mind were free *from* the struggle and free *for* other activities and pursuits. Identity was conceived as the character of a person, that is, the enduring moral habits of his or her life. In the consumeristic—postmodern—form of life of Nietzsche and the common consumer, habits, which foreclose freedom of choice, are anathema. Without habits and standing decisions they must struggle with every new option and opportunity. This is true not just for new purchasing options, but since as we shall see identity is bound up with consuming, for the sense of the self.

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<sup>20</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 236-37.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 237.

## ***It's All Arbitrary***

There is another paradox and contradiction that haunts the view of the world necessitated by advanced consumer capitalism. It is that if everything is a matter of choice, then nothing is worth choosing. For the ruling assumption is that whatever I choose is meaningful and true for me. Value is held to be in the choosing rather than in the choice. Each one is free to go with his or her own preferences. However, what is often missed is that this implies that everything is of equal value.

An apt analogy would be of a parent who gives the child the choice between a hamburger and chicken nuggets. The choice between the two is insignificant because they have the same (questionable) nutritional value. But if everything is of equal value then it does not matter what you choose. The choice, which was thought to bestow meaning and value on the individual, turns out to be meaningless after all. What we lack is a background of meaning and significance. In the visual arts, backgrounds provide a context and perspective against which the foreground can be understood and evaluated. Without a background, individual actors have no frame or context with which to make sense of their decisions and actions. Philosopher Charles Taylor calls this background a horizon of meaning, and he explains,

The agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself-meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions. That is what is self-defeating in modes of contemporary culture that concentrate on self-fulfillment *in opposition* to the demands of society, or nature, which *shut out* history and the bonds of solidarity.... Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order

*matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly then, to live under the postmodern presupposition of consumer culture that traditions and culture cannot embody meaningful issues and questions is to live in a world that is ultimately trivial and meaningless. The choices of lifestyle are at bottom as meaningless as the choice between a hamburger and nuggets. There is a gnawing suspicion at the bottom of our culture that there is no firm ground to stand on and nothing to live for.

Only the most honest or despairing are able to give voice to this fear. One of these honest voices is Jon Krakauer, the author of the best-selling account of an ill-fated ascent of Mt. Everest, entitled, *Into Thin Air*. Early on in the book he recounts the role that climbing played in his life.

By the time I was in my early twenties climbing had become the focus of my existence to the exclusion of almost everything else. Achieving the summit of a mountain was tangible, immutable, concrete. The incumbent hazards lent the activity a purpose that was sorely missing from the rest of my life. I thrilled in the fresh perspective that came from tipping the ordinary plane of existence on end. And climbing provided a sense of community as well.<sup>23</sup>

Living a life in a world saturated with only arbitrary choices, he longed for decisions that would make a difference and have real consequences. Making it to the peak of a mountain was concrete and undeniable. There is no mistaking a success for a failure. The goal is clear and not dependent upon the opinions of others. Meanwhile he speaks of the hazards which amount to real consequences to one's decisions. Bad decisions made high on a mountain could prove fatal; they are anything but arbitrary. So Krakauer chose to respond to the empty, formless world of western society by falling back upon an endeavor that hearkens back to a pre-civilized era where most things are a matter of life

<sup>22</sup>Taylor, *Ethics*, 40-41.

<sup>23</sup>Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997), 23.

or death. Thus they have a meaning and consequences that are anything but arbitrary. They also provide a sense of community. But outside of these extreme experiences significance is very elusive.

### ***The New Narrative of Consumerism***

This life of great promise and impotence is an exceedingly precarious one. If insecurity is the order of the day, then consumers are desperate for security, for a sense of identity and belonging that is less transitory. This indeterminacy arises from life lived without a sense of horizons, in Taylor's sense. To put it another way, life as a consumer is life without a clear idea of the goals and purposes of life beyond the temporary pleasure of consuming. There is only a collection of individual desires, activities and preferences. Gone is the idea of the common good. By way of contrast, in ancient Greece it was understood that the city would need to prosper if its citizens were to prosper; that the good of the whole was intricately linked to the good of each individual. In the present day, it is held that if each one is pursuing his or her own fulfillment and happiness, then everyone will be happy. Yet, as Robert Bellah and the other authors of *Habits of the Heart* chronicle, it is not clear to most Americans what one's life should be about. It is perplexing to know just what gives life its meaning and determination. The average American lives a life rich in material abundance (if considered against the rest of the world) and poor in spiritual significance. We have so many things but they mean very little.

Into this murky situation steps the advertising executive to save the day. Advertisements take ordinary objects and infuse them with a meaning and significance. They proclaim a million times a day that the purchase of this or that product will lead

inexorably to success, acceptance, peace, security, identity, happiness, and more. James Twitchell's strong statement deserves to be echoed when he proclaims, "Consumption of things and their meanings is how most Western young people cope in a world that science has pretty much bled of traditional meanings."<sup>24</sup> In a world that is exponentially increasing in complexity and where the individual is largely powerless to alter the forces that shape her or his life, purchasing feels like power.

Already in 1969, management guru Peter Drucker commented on the larger significance of a single, small purchase:

A universal appetite for small luxuries has emerged. They signify a little independence, a little control over economic destiny. They are a badge of freedom. Where the means are very limited—among the poor or among teenagers without much income of their own—the small luxury may be a soft drink, a lipstick, a movie, magazine or candy bar. For the emerging middle class, it may be the appliance in the kitchen....For the truly affluent it may be the advanced degree. That one can do without it makes the small luxury into a psychological necessity.<sup>25</sup>

Drucker's observation shows how consumerism is a way of life for both the rich and the poor alike. What has changed since he penned these words is that teenagers now have great purchasing power, and the poor now use what money they do have to purchase status items. Yet these changes seem to fulfill his prophetic words as the two groups are still those without much in the way of power, and thus they compensate for it by purchasing significance and freedom.

The logic of the American life is the narrative of the commercial advertisement. Whereas once, the Biblical narrative of redemption spoke to people's longing and dissatisfaction by its message of sin and redemption, now it is the religion of advertising where people look to have their needs met. It has been said that the job of a preacher is

<sup>24</sup>Twitchell, 12.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 13.

to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. This is equally true—if not more so—in describing the aim of the advertisement. The ad-men and women pitch their products as a means of comfort to those who are afflicted with all kinds of maladies, while at the same time other ads try to afflict the comfortable through images of an even better life.

Given this close parallel between religion and marketing it is perhaps not surprising that the pioneers in the early days of advertising were children of ministers, trained in seminaries, or the products of strong church environments. For example,

Artemas Ward, son of an Episcopal minister, whose slogans for Sapolio soap were almost as well known as the Songs of Solomon; John Wanamaker, a staunch Presbyterian who considered the ministry wand whose marketing genius helped make both the modern department store and the holidays like Mother's Day that give us time to use it; Claude C. Hopkins, who came from a long line of impoverished preachers, preached himself at seventeen, and translated his talent into copywriting for beer, carpet sweepers, lard, and canned meats; James Webb Young, who sold Bibles door-to-door as a true believer until he went to work at J. Walter Thompson where he did much the same job; Helen Lansdowne, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, who studied three years at Princeton Theological Seminary before applying her talents to selling all manner of products to women; Theodore MacManus, one of the few devout Catholics in early advertising, who held honorary degrees from three Catholic colleges and was the master of the “soft sell” until he quit, disgusted with advertising, especially its huckstering of cigarettes as health foods; Rosser Reaves, son of a Methodist minister, who mastered the “hard sell” and left as his legacy the Anacin ads with all the hammers pounding their anvils; Marion Harper, Jr., the president of his Methodist Sunday school class, who went on to manage McCann-Erickson; and F.W. Ayer, a devout Baptist and Sunday school superintendent, who gave his own agency his father's name, N. W. Ayer & Son, because it sounded more established, and then coined the motto “Keeping everlastingly at it” to make sure the point was made.<sup>26</sup>

The consistent thread suggests that the methods developed in the evangelical Great Awakening to provoke conversion were diverted to selling goods instead of God.

Advertisers afflict the comfortable by projecting images of a utopian life. It is a

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 63.

life without stress, safe from all insecurities, far from danger and scarcity. It is a life full of joys, pleasures, and satisfactions. The consumer is, then, cast over against this ideal world, thus exposing how poor her or his life is. In comparison to the world full of strong relationships, unlimited mobility, fulfilling adventure, and utter control, anyone's life will seem a mere shadow by comparison. Then, once the previously satisfied consumer is dissatisfied with his or her existence, the offer comes. It is the product full of the promise to close the gaping crevasse between their sad world and that of the Promised Land. The way to that heavenly place is through purchasing. If one sports that watch, gets that satellite dish, flashes that credit card, then the fulfillment is yours. Or put in a familiar phrase, "All of this can be yours, *if* the price is right!"

Each advertising story is, in its own way, a miniature story of sin and redemption.<sup>27</sup> The transgressions in this world are the sins of having dandruff, chronic halitosis, or a dish detergent that leaves spots. They are the errors of spending money on items out of fashion or of owning a computer that wastes too much time. This ersatz redemption is the freedom from these burdens and inconveniences. Purchasers are liberated from such things as the stigma of ring around the collar. They are disburdened from the oppression of having to cook a meal and thus allow time to exercise on the latest equipment that will give you a body to flaunt. Clearly, such liberation is a far cry from that offered by religion or even by social or political movements.

The greatest promise of advertising is that of "satisfaction guaranteed." For more than anything else, they need consumers who will believe that their product will meet the need that is exposed. The dynamic at work is that of desire and desire-met. This

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<sup>27</sup>Neil Postman calls advertisements "thirty-second homilies" in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 131.

alternating rhythm beats as a metronome in its back and forth motion. The consistency with which the promises are given by the advertisers and received by the consumers testifies to the willing part that consumers play. They are not merely the hapless victims of a vast consuming conspiracy. They like having their desires met. Therefore, “desire becomes its own purpose, the sole uncontested and unquestionable purpose.”<sup>28</sup> Desire and its fulfillment have become entrenched as the only acceptable and respectable ends of activity and purpose of life.

### ***Commodification and the Pure Relationship***

Through endless repetition of claims and promises, residents of a consumer culture have learned that they should expect to have their desires for safety and happiness met by the consumption of products. These products are commonly called commodities. A commodity is not a particular kind of product but an object seen in a particular kind of way. It is worth pausing for a moment and considering how something becomes a commodity and what the consequences for that transformation are.

A commodity can refer to anything that can be traded, bought and sold. The word is used in business circles to identify those products that are largely homogeneous and uniform, which means that they are easily exchanged, since different batches can be assumed to be of equal value, despite different origins. Commodity traders value commodities for the ease at which they may be bought and sold, rather than used, e.g. wheat, oil, milk, gold, metals and chemicals. In these markets commodities are valued for their ability to be traded, rather than for their intrinsic qualities, which are assumed to

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<sup>28</sup>Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 73.

be consistent from product to product.<sup>29</sup>

A distinguishing feature of commodities is their homogeneity and their ability to be divided up and sold in whatever unit the buyer wants. They are valued for their interchangeability. The quality and the content must be predictable. What is lost to view are their particularities, especially their origins. In the marketplace it is irrelevant whether grain was grown in Kansas or the Ukraine, whether beef comes from Iowa or Brazil, whether tennis shoes were manufactured in Delaware or Singapore. What is significant is that the buyer and seller expect the same things and that they are easily transported from one place to another.

Commodification, as a process, is the transformation of a non-commodity into a commodity. It entails the transformation of an object that is particular, unique and rooted in a place and a setting to one that is more universal, common, decontextualized and disconnected. An object has become a commodity when it is available to be appropriated by others for their own use. Borgmann's definition is useful not least for its brevity: "Something is available in this sense if it has been rendered instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy."<sup>30</sup> This is the ideal for a commodity, to be completely available to the end user in time, in space, in effort and comfort. The ideal commodity would be able to be instantly and effortlessly appropriated, a matter of a simple cut and paste. Digital entertainment, conveyed through wires, such as downloadable mp3s and pay-per-view movies, fits the requirements of being utterly available. They originate from nowhere, arrive on command to anywhere, are perfectly safe and free from any demands on the end user. In contrast, consider a play or local concert where the audience must leave home,

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<sup>29</sup>Karl Marx differentiated these two qualities by calling them "use value" and "exchange value."

<sup>30</sup>Borgmann, 41.

travel through “bad” parts of town, arrive at time determined by someone else, sit next to whoever buys the next ticket or plops down next to them. Not to mention that the content of the work presented might be as demanding on the audience to take it in as it was on the performers to get it ready for presentation.

Commodification gains its real progress and power, not when applied to material things, but to immaterial things. It is when we take the habits and expectations of consuming material goods and transfer them to immaterial things, such as traditions, experiences and relationships. In our advanced consumer economy this slicing and dicing of the world up into to small sellable pieces is big business. Vincent Miller laments the condition of our traditions, especially the religious ones, which have been removed from the communities where they have been practiced for years and sold as ready-made answers to spiritual hunger. He points to the chanting of Benedictine monks on the album, *Chant*, as one instance. Practices of prayer and mediation are another. The consequence of all of this commodification is a culture that is greatly fragmented, as the market is constantly in need of new products to de-contextualize and commodify. Another area where the process of commodification has exacted an incredible toll is in the area of personal relationships.

Relationships have always been a primary domain for self-discovery, self-fulfillment and self-exploration. What differs now from earlier eras is that personal relationships are considered to be completely separate and distinct from other social relationships, as we shall see. Relationships have been commodified where there is a general expectation that that they should bring only happiness and satisfaction. That is the key to romantic fiction of all kinds. Products are endlessly advertised to secure that loving relationship, which, it is assumed, will bring happiness with it. Further evidence

that relationships have become commodified is the way that they are expected to be *available*, in Borgmann's sense of immediate, safe and easy. This expectation sends lovers back to the self-help bookshelf time and time again to get the quick fix that they have been missing. These relationships are also commodified in the sense that they are held to be easy to attain and easy to dispose of, much like any other product.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens has analyzed these commodified relationships as "pure relationships." The pure relationship is the exact opposite of the formal or culturally constructed relationship. Consider marriage, traditionally conceived, as an archetypal example. Marriage was formerly considered an essentially formal and culturally constructed relationship. At one time it was a contract that was initiated by parents largely for economic and social reasons and was woven into the larger web of social and economic relationships of the community. With the rise of romantic love as the main motivation for marriage, external considerations came to be seen as an impediment to what the relationship was really about. Think of Romeo and Juliet. Giddens remarks, "Marriage becomes more and more a relationship initiated for, and kept going for as long as, it delivers emotional satisfaction to be derived from close contact with another."<sup>31</sup> The pure relationship is evaluated only upon its internal merits and benefits, that is, whether it meets the needs of the participants.

It is clear from this development that relationships are often considered largely as a product or a commodity. Thus, it is to be kept 'pure' from external considerations like economics, children, social standing, etc. As a result relationships are now subject to a cost/benefit analysis. On any given day one participant in a relationship may ask the question, "Is this relationship worth the hassle and the work and the fighting?" What is

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<sup>31</sup>Giddens, 89.

meant by “worth it” is whether the benefits of the relationship outweigh the costs. If the answer is No, the relationship is over. The cost of this purity from external constraints is that “anything that goes wrong between the partners intrinsically threatens the relationship itself.”<sup>32</sup> What was intended as a relationship based on pure love, which allows total intimacy and total freedom, is in reality quite risky and precarious. For complete honesty, say in the realm of a dark past, may drive the other person off. Therefore the paradox is that the pure relationship is a much more hazardous environment.

This pursuit of the pure relationship is put on very shaky grounds when combined with the liquid identity of the postmodern consumer. Bauman cautions, “Changing identity may be a private affair, but it always includes cutting off certain bonds and canceling certain obligations; those on the receiving side are seldom consulted, let alone given the chance to exercise free choice.” One thinks here especially of the children of parents who separated or divorced because of “irreconcilable differences” or because they’ve “grown apart,” two of the most common explanations. Bauman continues,

But there is little doubt that when ‘trickled down’ to the poor and powerless, the new-style partnership with its fragility of marital contract and the ‘purification’ of the union of all but the ‘mutual satisfaction’ function spawns much misery, agony and human suffering and an ever growing volume of broken, loveless and prospectless lives.<sup>33</sup>

This ideal of the pure relationship with no external ‘burdens’ is alive and well with Christians as well. For instance, one Christian author has written a book entitled *Liquid Church*, which calls Christians to get over their addiction to any kind of solid church and strive for a church that has no structure and is comprised only of informal

<sup>32</sup>Giddens, 90.

<sup>33</sup>Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 90.

relationships.<sup>34</sup>

## **Commitment**

What defines and gives some structure to these pure relationships is commitment.

In returning to the marriage relationship as an example, one might object that commitment has always been the centerpiece; that is what the vows are all about. But that is precisely the difference. Earlier, the commitment was the vows. Couples were in a committed relationship because at a certain time on a certain day they had committed themselves to one another until death did part them. This commitment was made before friends, family and church, who would hold them to it.

In the pure relationship the commitment is not a once-for-all affair, but instead one that must be continually renewed. As Giddens puts it, “Commitment is essentially what replaces the external anchors that close personal connections used to have in pre-modern situations.”<sup>35</sup> Each couple must constantly measure their respective commitment, in a situation without pre-existing expectations as to what makes a relationship “serious” or not. In earlier days having sex and living together was a sign to the couple and to those around them that their relationship was longer term. But in the pure relationship everything is internal. No external signs point to the state of the relationship, such as saying vows or living together.

Therefore, partners must constantly measure how well they are aligned with one another. It calls for continual refection upon how you are feeling as well as great honesty. It also entails a great deal of risk, for your level of commitment could at a

<sup>34</sup>Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

<sup>35</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 92.

certain point greatly exceed that of the other, making you susceptible to the pain of rejection. The paradox of relationships played in this key is that the goal of deep intimacy requires a plot of land fenced in with trust for it to grow while at the same time there is less and less to trust. The other person has only committed as long as the relationship is paying benefits. What is being trusted is not the other's word or vow or commitment but the other person's personality and the trust that has been built up through regular interactions. One now must ask, do I trust what I know of this other person that he or she seems committed and will be faithful? The answer to this question is subjective and hazy, making relationship decisions very difficult.

Bauman catalogs well the features of these commitments as the products of consumer capitalism, when he writes that “bonds and partnerships tend to be viewed and treated as things meant to be *consumed*, not produced; they are subject to the same criteria of evaluation as all other objects of consumption.”<sup>36</sup> And again, in this new environment it is “no longer the task of both partners to make the relationship work,” Bauman continues,

it is instead a matter of obtaining satisfaction from a ready-to-consume product; if the pleasure derived is not up to the standard promised and expected or if the novelty wears off together with the joy, one can sue for divorce, quoting consumer rights. . . . What follows is that the assumed temporariness of partnerships tends to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the human bond, like all other consumer objects, is not something to be worked out through protracted effort and occasional sacrifice, but something which one expects to bring satisfaction right away, instantaneously, at the moment of purchase—and something that one rejects if it does not satisfy, something to be kept and used only as long as (and no longer than) it continues to gratify—then there is not much point in ‘throwing good money after bad,’ in trying hard and harder still, let alone in suffering, discomfort and unease in order to save the partnership. Even a minor stumble may cause the partnership to fall and break down; trivial disagreements turn into bitter conflicts, slight frictions are taken for the signals of

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<sup>36</sup>Bauman, 163.

essential and irreparable incompatibility.<sup>37</sup>

But romantic relationships are not the only victims of the new order.

## **The New Family**

We saw earlier how the relationships have become commodified as pure relationships. A valid and authentic relationship is one that is paying dividends; it is worth the investment. Conversely, relationships that are more ‘give’ than ‘get’ are held to be, at minimum, suspect and possibly invalid. One area where this thinking has completely reshaped the environment is the family. Talk is common now of the “functional family.” The functional family is that set of relations that perform the functions of the family, i.e. nurture, protection, love, etc. Biological and social bonds decreasingly define the family. This is particularly true for young adults. Consider Dawn Trautman, who

was in bad shape. Run ragged by studying for the GREs, holding down a full-time job, and choreographing a high school musical, she had a nasty case of pneumonia that would land her in bed for over a month. But Trautman, 31, who was living alone in a St. Paul, Minn., condo, didn’t miss a single meal while she was sick. Although her parents live nearby, it was her friends who kept her nourished, bringing her orange juice, making chicken noodle soup, even feeding her in bed when she couldn’t get up.<sup>38</sup>

Dawn turned to her friends who acted as a family used to. Of her group of friends she says, “We’ve become sort of an urban family.” The formation of these tribes is becoming more frequent as people are putting off getting married and having kids. The fictional versions can be seen on the TV shows *Seinfeld*, *Friends* and *Will & Grace*.

What remains to be seen is how durable these relationships are. The ties of a biological family persist through the most acrimonious feud, but there is no reason for a

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>38</sup>Caroline Hsu, “Tribal Culture,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 13, 2003, 42.

tribe to survive such strain. In fact, it would go against the ethic of the pure relationship. Here again, the benefits of a vibrant, active relationship are offset by the inherent risk and instability of the arrangement. Yet again we see how risk has become a pervasive feature of postmodern, consumeristic life. It is in this environment and under these presuppositions that individuals must work out their identity and sense of self. The background is always changing so there is no point of reference. Each individual is constrained to pursue their own satisfaction and identity through commodities, which now include even other people.

Many people have concluded that there must be more than this.

## CHAPTER 4

### SELF-MAKING IN A CONSUMERISTIC CULTURE

Having surveyed the key features of consumer culture today in the previous chapter, the current chapter will look specifically at the shape that personal identity takes in such an environment.

#### ***An Analytical Tool***

There is an advertisement for the soft drink Dr. Pepper whose jingle could serve as the motto for the popular view of what it means to be a fully human self. The jingle goes, “Be you, Do what you do, Be original, An individual, Drink Dr. Pepper.” One should be utterly unique if one is to be fulfilled as a person. The irony is that this uniqueness, this “real you,” is expressed by purchasing mass-produced goods. This irony alerts us to the reality that identity can never be solely an individual matter. It is always given shape by the culture and society. Therefore, it is useful to ask that question, “What shape does it take in consumer culture?”

Tom Wright, in his research on first century Judaism, has advanced the thesis that in cultures and societies, worldviews are expressed through three interlocking means: story, symbols, and praxis.<sup>1</sup> Wright explains, “Stories are a basic constituent of human life.... The stories which characterize the worldview itself are thus located, on the map of human knowing, at a more fundamental level than explicitly formulated beliefs, including theological beliefs.”<sup>2</sup> This idea runs against the widely held notion that the explicit beliefs that people confess are the guiding stars for their lives. However, it rings

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<sup>1</sup>N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 216-240.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 38.

true in the ways that people, both individually and corporately, identify themselves, and their values and direction in life. Stories constitute the context that gives their lives and actions meaning. They form the background against which the actions of the present are understood and measured. Contemporary theorists of human selfhood also share this perspective.<sup>3</sup>

The second aspect of identity that Wright identifies is symbols. The stories are distilled and expressed through symbols. These are symbols very broadly understood. They can be objects as well as events in the life of the people. Wright goes on to say,

Symbols function as social and/or cultural *boundary-markers*: those who observe them are insiders; those who do not are outsiders. And these symbols, as the acted and visible reminders of a worldview that normally remains too deep for causal speech, form the actual grid through which the world is perceived. They determine how, from day to day, human beings will view the whole of reality. They determine what will, and what will not, be intelligible or assimilable within a particular culture.<sup>4</sup>

The symbols express, conserve, and focus the narrative. These symbols form the major categories of thinking and perceiving.

Third comes praxis—the word from which we get our English words, practical and practice. Praxis is the sum of regular activities and patterns of life.<sup>5</sup> To look at praxis is to understand that people's actions express their beliefs and values, however inconsistently. How people go about their daily lives, how they interact, what skills they have, are important factors in the distinctive identity of a person. Activities also provide ways for people to participate in the stories that give their lives meaning.

Wright uses these three categories as a way to analyze the identity and self-

<sup>3</sup>See Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 19-24, 43.

<sup>4</sup>Wright, 124.

<sup>5</sup>Schrag, “The term *praxis*, which has been in the philosophical vocabulary since the time of the Greeks, is particularly helpful for articulating the communal character of human existence. The parameters of the term extend to the skills, habits, customs and public functions that provide the context of intelligibility for individuated bodily motility.” 76.

understanding of the Jews and Christians of the first century. They can just as profitably be employed in analyzing what forms identity takes in today's postmodern, consumeristic world.

### **Stories: Personal Narrative**

For centuries the chief narrative through which individuals understood their lives came from classical, traditional, and biblical sources. Take as an example John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*, which exerted enormous influence on generations of men and women throughout the English-speaking world. This allegory traces a soul's journey through the perils of this life to the final destination in God.

With the rise of the modern world came a much more secular outlook, which focused far more on the blessings of this life than those of the next. With the demise of these older narratives came the need for different stories that one could use to guide them through this life and with which one could make sense of it.

One very notable example came from the pen of Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), who has been considered the quintessential American since his own lifetime. Franklin himself was influenced by *Pilgrim's Progress*, but more as a piece of literature than a piece of devotion. In Franklin's memoirs, which came to be called his *Autobiography*, he offers his life as an example of how others might make their own lives a success. This stands as clear evidence of the rise in importance of the individual in the modern era. Franklin's story is the model for what has become the classic American tale of a poor boy that makes it good through hard work and ingenuity. Franklin relates his story,

Having emerged from poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life with a considerable share of felicity, the conduced means I made use of, which with the blessing of God so well succeeded, my posterity may like

to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated.

As he moved through the stations of his life, from being the son of a soap and candle maker, to an apprentice to his brother the printer, to being a printer in his own right, to a lawmaker, a diplomat and to being a scientist, he constantly grew in financial prosperity and in the esteem of popular and powerful people alike. This esteem often yielded even greater financial advantage. Clearly, for him, success is worldly and financial—no longer a journey to the heavenly city.

Moreover, he conceives of his life as a manuscript of which he was the author and master of his fate. He likens his failings in life to errors in a text, or *errata* as he calls them, which might be amended, as an editor would do to a rough draft. They are definitely not sins that must be atoned for or forgiven. In the same way, he is not concerned with right or wrong, good or bad, but rather with what is useful for advancement. He gives great consideration in the book to how best to influence others and win their good favor, and keeping up appearances is a part of that endeavor. In a real way, this worldly resident of Philadelphia aimed to be all things to all people. Ormond Seavey, in his biography of Franklin, has written, “It was always natural for Franklin to be trying on a fresh identity, as if he were putting on new clothes.”<sup>6</sup> In this way Franklin sets the stage for later developments in our own time where identities are taken up and put away at a moment’s notice, as shall be explained in what follows.

What is significant to note at this point is that Franklin’s rags-to-riches story of the self-made man has become one of the key resources with which present day Americans think of themselves and their lives. It stands both as an influential work that

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<sup>6</sup>Ormond Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and the Life* (State College, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 78.

in and of itself has influenced countless Americans through direct contact, as well as being the very epitome of the genre. It has been often commented that Americans, even poor ones, do not want the rich to be treated harshly by the government because they fancy that they shall be numbered among them one day, even if their present prospects are bleak. Such is the power of the American success story to shape the way ordinary people view their lives and their future. This narrative is one of the main tools used by postmodern people to make sense of their lives. It provides the structure for their story, giving it form and direction and a purpose.

There is another strand of the American intellectual tradition that comes directly through Emerson. According to this strand the authentic story of one's life is the story of the struggle to be true to your inner self—a battle that is fought against all of the forces of conformity and society. Robert Bellah has called Franklin's variety, Utilitarian Individualism, because of its emphasis on what is useful in getting ahead in society. This latter kind he calls, Expressive Individualism, due to its stress on the value of expressing the true self that makes up the true core of one's self.<sup>7</sup> These two strands coexist in American culture, sometimes with one taking the limelight over the other, but never replacing it. At times the two have been combined in creative ways that have had powerful effects.

The fulfillment of the individual is one of the main plots in our national narrative. Forces of consumer capitalism have transformed this narrative so that it is now widely assumed that the best path to fulfillment is through consumption. The consumption of ever-new experiences, products, and services advances the plot along. The working assumption seems to be that, if one fulfills one's needs each day, she or he will end up

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<sup>7</sup>Bellah, 32-35.

with a satisfying life. However, the activity of consumption does not disburden the postmodern person from the task of telling their life story.

Every story needs its divisions, or its chapters, as it were. Each person, in the process of telling his or her story, points to significant events and markers that divide up one's life into ages or stages. What has changed as we advance deeper into consumer capitalism is that the primary markers are internal and personal rather than external and public. That is to say, that they do not come, as in earlier times, from the institutions and traditions in which the whole community participates (e.g. coming-of-age rituals, celebrations, social crises); instead they come from the events in the lifespan of the individual (e.g. puberty, relationships and marriages, births, traumas, divorces, empty nests, mid-life crises). This is what one would expect in an age when the traditional answers of the society fail to provide meaning. The societal markers can still be significant, but only in so far as they are so for each individual.<sup>8</sup>

Take, for example, the new trend in American weddings. Prevalent in the past was the wedding ceremony where traditional language tied the couple and their commitment into the larger story of God and his people. Presently, a greater number of people see a wedding ceremony as an opportunity to write another chapter in their personal and private story. Therefore, they only feel the need to include those elements and people that are personally meaningful. This trend is evident in the growing popularity of “destination weddings.” These events take place on a mountaintop, on a beach, or in some other remote location and involved only those close to the couple, or perhaps only the couple themselves. Gone is the communal context of earlier days. That community is either no longer present or seen as irrelevant at best and oppressive at

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<sup>8</sup>Giddens, 75-80.

worst. The consumer couple wants to be free from the scrutiny and input of the family or community. But this freedom comes at the price of being “free” from the pledges of others to love and support the couple in this most difficult of relationships. The result of this process of the shrinking of the narrative from public to personal is that events and stories have become privatized. They have become objects of consumption, with no independent existence outside of those immediately involved. Each one must, to paraphrase Walt Whitman, sing of a song of themselves.

### **Symbols: Self-Branding**

Chapter two surveyed the importance of brands in a consumer economy, but not their parallel importance in social life. To review, brands were used to distinguish two products that were nearly identical. Marketers constantly try to “position” a product to appeal to a certain segment of the population by giving it a certain image. Thus, the difference between two products is not between the products themselves, but between the images of the products that are conveyed by brands.

In the absence of traditional standards used to distinguish between people, such as caste or class, there remains a drive for people to differentiate themselves from one another in terms of status. This role of differentiating people from one another is played by brands in American post-traditional society. Consumers use brands to define who they are, who they want to be, and who they are not. Michael Silverstein and Neil Fiske have noticed a significant trend where consumers are willing to bargain hunt and do without in some areas so that they can afford to buy high-status brands in other areas. These New Luxury consumers, as they call them, seek an Individual Style to project to the world that they see through purchased goods. Silverstein and Fiske say that in some

categories of purchased goods,

such as cars, brands are extremely important to expressing Individual Style. This is partially because the advertising messages contained within each brand have been sharply defined and repeated a million times over. Even if we don't exactly believe in what the advertisers tell us, we are aware of the messages and know that others know them, too....Brands play an important role in creating an Individual Style that sends messages to all kinds of people—including potential employers, colleagues, friends, lovers, and family members. . . . Brands provide a reasonably reliable, efficient and consistent method for signally others about who I am or who I would like to be. These signals tend to be most important in brands that are mobile, whether worn or carried: goods such as shoes, clothing, spirits, fashion accessories, and watches.<sup>9</sup>

Silverstein and Fiske aim to show how consumers are not just after the product, but are after the image, status, and “feel” of the product that comes with the brand. They are aware of and indeed counting on the fact that others have seen the same advertisements and will have the same perception of the brand and its wearer. So in wearing the brand they are able to define themselves in the eyes of others.

This phenomenon is in no way restricted to established income earners, but is just as present among the young. Alissa Quart has documented how prominent wearing the right brands has become among teenagers. She interviewed teenagers ranging from Brooklyn Jamaicans to suburban princesses to Christian Midwesterners. She learned that wherever they lived, it was the wearing of non-brand clothes that gets one ostracized. It is no longer important to be “pretty and popular.” You have to wear the right goods. She quotes Lenita from Brooklyn, “You know what you’re supposed to be wearing. You see it on TV,” and Renee, a thirteen-year old from affluent Westchester County, outside New York City, “They advertise on the buses: Levi’s, FuBu. You’ve got to wear that gear to

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<sup>9</sup>Michael Silverstein and Neil Fiske, *Trading Up: The New American Luxury* (New York: Portfolio, 2003), 94.

be in the in crowd.”<sup>10</sup>

These kids have gotten the message: it is not who you are but what you wear that is important. Or, as the saying goes, “The clothes make the man,” or girl as the case may be. Quart describes the process:

Once kids bought an article of branded clothing at a department store; now they buy an entire identity, a whole set of clothes by one manufacturer at that brand’s ersatz boutique. Kids become Prada girls or Old Navy chicks or Pacific Sun, a.k.a. PacSun boys—and even volunteer their services to these beloved brands to show the extent of their identification and devotion.<sup>11</sup>

As they identify with their products, or more specifically the image of the brand, they achieve social recognition and a sense of standing and identity. This process may be unconscious for many, but for many others it is a highly conscious process. Take Katia J\_\_\_\_\_, one time Haitian immigrant, who enrolled at Hunter College, told Stuart Ewen,

When I purchase any magazine … the first thing I usually look for is what is in style, what the models are wearing and also for the new hairdos. Style plays a major part in my life. It is important to me, it’s my way of communicating with society and saying this is who I am, this is how I feel, and this is how I want you to identify me.... Image is my way of speaking out without actually opening my mouth.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly she knows what she is doing and why she is doing it. She uses style as the prime vehicle of expressing herself to others, and not just how she feels but her identity. While this attitude may be the most obvious among teenagers, since they are the most heavily targeted by advertisers, it is equally true of all segments of society.

What is implied in all of these quotes is that consumers not only purchase specific brands to differentiate themselves from others, but to connect and identify with others as well. Historian Daniel J. Boorstin has cogently expressed this reality:

<sup>10</sup>Alissa Quart, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (New York: Perseus, 2003), 14.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>12</sup>Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1999 [1988]., xxii.

To speak of American “materialism” is ... both an understatement and a misstatement. The material goods that historically have been the symbols which elsewhere separated men from one another have become, under American conditions, symbols which hold men together. From the moment of our rising in the morning, the breakfast food we eat, the coffee we drink, the automobile we drive to work—all these and nearly all the things we consume become thin, but not negligible, bonds with thousands of other Americans.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in consuming things we select, we are expressing to others who we are and who we want to be, where we are and where we want to be, and who we want to be with. We buy into the stories told by advertisers of salvation and redemption and make them our own. In short we define ourselves and our identities with our credit cards. Tom Beaudoin captures this point well as he writes, “Branding is a sort of religious system, a spiritual discipline, that can provide as persuasive a worldview as the scriptures or any traditional religion.”<sup>14</sup> Branding not only tells us about ourselves but also about our place in the world, and even about the world itself.

Advertisers very intentionally take on this task. Consider the following: Volvo advertises a “car that can not only help save your life, but help save your soul as well.” Toyota trucks, not to be outdone, exhort, “Haul some concrete. Move some lumber. Save the world.” Or as Xerox’s John Seely Brown told *Fortune* magazine, “The job of leadership today is not just to make money. It’s to make meaning.”<sup>15</sup> Consumerism is the religion of the age.

As with any religious system, it must be made of more than beliefs, these beliefs must be distilled into practices. This is equally true for the religion of consumerism. The practice is called shopping.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Twitchell, 17.

<sup>14</sup>Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 39.

<sup>15</sup>Brooks, 100, 133.

## ***Praxis: Shopping for Our Selves***

The activities, or praxis, which embody and express this view of the life, might be summarized as *shopping for lifestyles*. Shopping is the central action. As consumers, the chief mode of existence is the hunt for the next purchase or product. It is through this activity that we animate our stories and appropriate the meaning of television and the mall. We shop for clothes, shoes, cars, cell-phones and furniture. We use brands to help us to know what to buy. But shopping has become a whole way of life. Bauman wonderfully describes the all-pervasive nature of shopping:

We ‘shop’ for the skills needed to earn our living and for the means to convince would-be employers that we have them; for the kind of image it would be nice to wear and ways to make others believe that we are what we wear; . . . for ways to earn the love of the beloved and the least costly ways of finishing off the union once love has faded and the relationship has ceased to please; for the best expedients of saving money for a rainy day and the most convenient ways to spend money before we earn it; for the resources for doing faster the things that are to be done and for things to do in order to fill the time thus vacated; for the most mouth-watering foods and the most effective diet to dispose of the consequences of eating them; for the most powerful hi-fi amplifiers and the most effective headache pills.<sup>16</sup>

There is no end to the shopping list. The one thing that we cannot choose is to stop shopping. In fact, being a bad shopper has become cause for shame in our culture. Commercials regularly depict people who have made bad shopping choices as worthy of pity if not scorn. Making bad decisions means a waste of time or money. Any amount of time devoted to better shopping is portrayed as time well spent.

Shoppers rely heavily on name brands. David F. D’Alessandro has written a book for business executives on the importance of brand management, called, *Brand Warfare*. In it he says that brands do three significant things: (1) They save time. (2) They project

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<sup>16</sup>Bauman,74.

the right message. And (3) they provide an identity.<sup>17</sup> While he is talking about what they do for products and material goods, the same could equally be said for what they do for the people who buy them. They save time in conveying to others who do not know you, in this anonymous, urban world, just what kind of person you are or want to be. They not only provide the message, they are the language in which the message is conveyed. They are both the medium and the message. Finally and most importantly, they provide an identity to the consumer. Identifying with one's brand is a taken-for-granted novelty of our consumer culture.

To turn to the second part of the praxis of identity in consumer culture, the shopping that is done is at a deep level – a shopping for a lifestyle. Consumers shop around in the supermarket of identities until they find the one that they like. They wear it as long as it suits, and then they discard it and take up another. The acquisition of each product is a decision about who you are and who you want to be. You could say that we shop for ourselves. In this shopping for the self, we have to choose which brands to wear and to use, some go together and some do not. How does one know which do and which do not? “Television illustrates a thousand times each hour how branded objects are dovetailed together to form a coherent pattern of selfhood, a lifestyle.” writes Twitchell.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, this collection of brands that any one consumer puts together is called a lifestyle. This is not just confined to the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Lifestyles are the regular practices of sub-groups within the culture. These practices are manifested in habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favored places for encountering others.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>David F. D'Alessandro, *Brand Warfare: 10 Rules for Building the Killer Brand* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 19.

<sup>18</sup>Twitchell, 105.

<sup>19</sup>Bellah et al. refer to these as lifestyle enclaves about which he writes, “The contemporary enclave is

When one sees a group of kids dressed in black, with pale faces, and jet-black hair, they have adopted a lifestyle that has been called Gothic. Or when one meets a woman who is committed to rigorous physical fitness, eating natural foods, and wearing running shoes wherever she goes, she has adopted a lifestyle. These lifestyles taken together help to answer the question, “Who am I?” Therefore, every choice large or small about clothes, actions, where and when to meet people, is a decision about who to be as much as it is about how to act. “The more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, it’s making and remaking.”<sup>20</sup> The choice of lifestyle has arisen in the vacuum of traditional cultural forms. If there are no roles to choose or social parts to play, then how does one define one’s identity? The answer in the postmodern, post-traditional world is by *lifestyle*.

The postmodern world defines freedom the absence of limits or boundaries.<sup>21</sup> But there is another dark side of this idea of freedom, in addition to the one noted earlier. It is that the raw materials change. They are the stuff of fashion. Just as designers and retailers want to sell more of their products so the rate of change in our consumer culture has dramatically increased. The styles that are hip today, are guaranteed to be hopelessly out of date tomorrow. As Silverstein and Fiske put it, “Self-branding through association with brand names can be tricky because of the speed of the fashion cycle. Messages can

based on a degree of individual choice that largely frees it from traditional ethnic and religious boundaries.... We might consider the lifestyle enclave an appropriate form of collective support in an otherwise radically individualizing society.” Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swindler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1985; Perennial Library, 1986), 73.

<sup>20</sup>Giddens, 81. Or Bellah again, “In a period when work is seldom a calling and few of us find a sense of who we are in public participation as citizens, the lifestyle enclave, fragile and shallow though it often is, fulfills that function [of identity definition] for us all.” 75.

<sup>21</sup>Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 83.

change quickly, and brands can become distorted in meaning.”<sup>22</sup> This rotation means not that lifestyles and identities *can* be replaced but that they *must*, or else you will be out of step. Therefore one must remain flexible and only loosely committed to one’s chosen identity in order to be able to dispose of it as needed. What began as a quest for freedom, the freedom to define yourself and to define the world for yourself has become a relentless mandate and an unavoidable burden. One has no choice but to define oneself in every activity. As Bruce Cockburn has sung in “Pacing the Cage”:

I've proven who I am so many times  
 The magnetic strip's worn thin  
 And each time I was someone else  
 And every one was taken in  
 Hours chatter in high places  
 Stir up eddies in the dust of rage  
 Set me to pacing the cage

Cockburn poignantly captures the narrow scope of life under these conditions—proving who you are by what you buy, presenting a convincing image to others only to change it and have to start all over again. Identity becomes as inconsequential as it is easy to obtain. One can only pace back and forth within the consumer system, for there is no way out.

These lifestyle choices include the body itself and not just what covers it. The consumer also tells their story by adorning or modifying their body. Consider the phrase used to sell the exercise equipment, Boflex – “You have the power to redefine your body and yourself.” The body is the means of expressing one’s story. This happens through tattoos, body piercings, weight lifting, dieting, plastic surgery, etc. Adopting a lifestyle also connects one with others who have adopted the same lifestyle. The shared decisions create a common ground on which very different individuals can relate. It is not

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<sup>22</sup>Silverstein and Fiske, 94. See also Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 162.

surprising that the body should have ascended to such a role, since the body is literally the physical boundary between the self and society. Identity is the interaction of those two forces, and they collide moment-by-moment on the body.

In addition to thinking about a collection of brands being formed into a lifestyle, it is not too much of a stretch to think about the person themselves as a commodity and their name as a brand. If the reader is questioning the extent to which shopping, lifestyles, and brands have to do with one's identity and sense of self, consider the following author, whose work wonderfully synthesizes the different parts analyzed above.

### ***Brand Identity***

Robin Fisher Roffer, a very successful marketing expert and self-described brand strategist, has taken the leap in encouraging people to think of themselves as a commodity in need of a brand. Her self-help book is entitled, *Make a Name for Yourself: 8 Steps Every Woman Needs to Create a Personal Brand Strategy for Success* and makes for a perfect illustration of the postmodern mindset. She states from the outset, “We identify a product by and with its brand.”<sup>23</sup> By reversing the logic she claims that when we are dealing with our own name and reputation we are dealing with our identity. In the following she lays out the plan and promise of her book:

This book gives you the tools to brand yourself before someone else does it to you—or to change your brand if it doesn’t reflect your true self....in these pages, *you are the brand*. Your goal will be to let your brand become a vehicle for your most authentic self. In this way you’ll distinguish yourself from others who do similar work, affirm your true identity, highlight your talents, and establish your reputation in business. Reinforcing your brand, practicing brand consistency, will

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<sup>23</sup>Robin Fisher Roffer, *Make a Name for Yourself: 8 Steps Every Woman Needs to Create a Personal Brand Strategy for Success* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 3.

cause people to respond to you just as you'd like them to, so that when they hear your name mentioned they make positive associations. Eventually a trusted brand earns customer loyalty. You can expect the same.<sup>24</sup>

Her ideas and advice epitomize so many of the trends characteristic of consumerism. She carries on Franklin's belief in the self-made person, who is trying to get ahead by distinguishing oneself and creating a great reputation and winning the loyalty of others. These 'others' she calls customers and thus also demonstrates the value of material success, which was also true of Franklin. She states unabashedly that when she talks about "*success in the workplace*," she means that form of success "as symbolized by financial reward and/or professional respect."<sup>25</sup>

Yet, Roffer does not stop there, for in the next sentence she says, "But I'm also talking about self-actualization. The process of branding allows you to become the person you were meant to be. Branding makes you an active partner fulfilling your destiny in business and in life."<sup>26</sup> In holding up both public acclaim as well as the goal of self-actualization, she is combining the two strands of our American individualism, the utilitarian and the expressive. She gives voice to the utilitarian one when she urges her followers to take steps that will "cause people to respond to you as you would like them to." Do what is useful to advance yourself and your reputation. She embodies the expressive vein when she constantly urges them on in "honoring your authentic self and sharing your personal truth."<sup>27</sup> Of these words Emerson would be duly proud. Roffer is vaguely aware that what is deep inside may not be the most attractive self to present to others. She minimizes this darker side by invoking the modern distinction between the

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 19.

public and private self, when she states, “We’re talking about authenticity within the realm of what’s acceptable in your particular business culture.”<sup>28</sup> Otherwise, she is extremely optimistic about the possibility of combining the private self and the public self into a very profitable merger.

Steps one and two of Roffer’s eight step plan (also very Franklin-esque) advise each individual to look deep within in order to divine one’s own personal values, their mission and their objectives for life. To help, Roffer gives examples of her own: “My values have to do with empowerment, integrity, and love.” Her reasons for choosing these are self-referential, that is, grounded only in her own self, and in that which gives her pleasure. This is evident in her explanation, “I feel the absolute best when these values are operating in my life.”<sup>29</sup> These values are good and authentic because they make her feel good. The same is true for her idea of the good life, which she describes in the following way,

Today my standards for living well still have to do with safety, but they also have to do with adventure and with beautiful things. I love to travel. I feel good about spending my money on new experiences and making memories. Living well, for me, has to do with being able to buy time: To afford someone to come in and clean my house once a week. To hire an assistant who will run errands, make copies, and handle the phones.<sup>30</sup>

This is spoken like a true consumer! The good life is that collection of goods and services and experiences which offer the most pleasure and the least inconvenience and discomfort. Her formula is the perfect plan for living and thriving under the conditions of consumer capitalism.

Significantly, the process of defining the values, mission, and purpose, which she

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 47.

lays out, are very close to the results of having a worldview story. Since stories furnish their holders with values, purposes, visions of the good life and salvation. True to form, Roffer's definition of the self is an intractably individual one. It is therefore always open to constant revision, as is clear when she proclaims, "Branding gives you the opportunity to become brand-new."<sup>31</sup> This self-help book lines up perfectly with the form of postmodern, consumer identity as surveyed above.

This is equally true with her counsel in a chapter entitled, "Learn the Secrets to Packaging Your Brand." What she calls packaging your brand is equivalent to the purchasing of a lifestyle that is characteristic of postmodern identity. She writes, "Packaging is all about appearances and what they signify in the marketplace, and how you can and should use how you look as an integral part of your brand."<sup>32</sup> Replace lifestyle for brand and the sentence reads the same. Roffer is advocating the use of certain lifestyles to distinguish oneself from others and so to get notice and respect. She counsels would-be self-branders to "Distinguish yourself from your competition and the rest of the crowd, but don't look so out of sync as to give the impression you'd never fit in." She also explains that "dressing for success today means reflecting your authentic self in a way that attracts your target audience."<sup>33</sup> It will no doubt take many trips to the mall to give attention to all of the areas that she demands must be "meticulously maintained," including: car, clothes, resume, work environment, website, hair, cosmetics, nails, and your fragrance. Each should be attended to and each should dovetail and blend with all of the others, thus presenting a coherent picture. This lifestyle picture is your "package" and should communicate to others the "self" that you would

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 138 and 137.

like them to see, as well as the real you.

What is so remarkable about this book is the way that it completely encapsulates the logic of consumerism as it applies to identity. It is post-traditional, individualistic, market-centered, self-creating, and brand-dependant. It epitomizes how Americans have completely internalized the values, symbols, and processes of the market. This is the form of identity in advanced consumer capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

In the Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, a wise man gives a warning that forms a theme of the entire novel. He says, “Forget about what you are escaping *from*. Reserve your anxiety for what you are escaping *to*.<sup>34</sup> This advice should have been offered to proponents of modernity who did all that they could to jettison the burdens of the past and tradition. These jettisoning has produced its own weighty burden, which has fallen upon the backs of today’s younger generations.

The main focus of this work has been identity. Identity comes from story. The postmodern, consumer world is devoid of great stories that offer transcendent meaning. The storehouse of stories that postmodern people can draw from has been greatly depleted. The available plots and genres come largely from 30-second commercials or thirty-minute sit-coms, where a problem is posed, a need expressed or a situation created, only to be quickly resolved in a way that entertains and satisfies. But the deeper question—to what end?—is left untouched. It is unclear what difference it makes that a

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<sup>34</sup>Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (New York: Picador, 2000), 21. For a non-fiction account, Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 26.

problem is resolved or a need is met. What is the significance of one need or desire over another? As demonstrated earlier these questions have been relegated to the individual to determine on the basis of his or her life story, as if a moment's reflection on one's desires and experiences reveals the purpose of life. It is a situation filled with tension and contradiction. Nevertheless, the dogma of culture dictates that the ideas of what is good and worthy are left up to each individual. Meanwhile, the individual looks outward to find answers, templates, and models to guide, shape and explain his or her life.

However, since public answers have been ruled out of bounds, they are left only with answers to specific problems, like weight-loss or hair-loss. Their lives become contracted to an endless series of small problems and answers—answers that are usually purchased. In short they have become consumers and their world has become nothing more than a marketplace. There are no kingdoms to conquer, no borders to secure, no great voyages or pilgrimages to undertake, no wisdom to seek, or weak and helpless to rescue, no gods to serve, no art to create, and no transcendent to grasp. There remain just things to buy and experiences to consume and thrills to seek. They are bright, shiny things, to be sure, packed with vast technological power and loaded with promises of freedom from discomfort and social advancement and of amusing satisfaction. But they are products nonetheless. They have a shelf life bounded by “planned obsolescence.” They shall quickly be worn out or, sooner still, be out of fashion. Either way, they must be cast aside to make way for the new, “new thing.”

Consumers live in the “now.” The past is irrelevant. It is too cumbersome to carry along, to bulky to make room for. Yes, parts of the past can be dredged up, artifacts can become the latest craze, but only as a focal point for the experience of nostalgia. In other words, it is not a look at the past for its own sake, in all of its complexity and

difficulty, but a screen upon which we can project our fantasies about how we would like things to have been, and still to be.

Neither do consumers have a future. There is no line of direction that extends from the past through the point of the present into the future. The future lurks out there as both a risk and a resource for the present. It is a resource in that it can be borrowed against to make purchases in the here and now; it can be mortgaged. Yet, it equally stands as a risk, an entity that cannot be controlled by all of our powers of image-production and technology. It threatens to overwhelm the source of our hope: prosperity. We do our best to colonize the future. To settle the wild frontier to make it yield to our will, but it is a constant battle to be fought and one that can never be won. Like Lewis Carroll's Red Queen, we must run twice as fast just to remain where we are.

What is needed is a different story. A story that begins way back in the mists of the past that leads up to where we are, and that sweeps us up and carries us into a definite and determinate future, all to an end and a *telos*. Every good story needs a good beginning and a good ending. It needs a lot of tension and a point of climax. Such a story would form the background against which we could understand and evaluate our own lives. It would form the “horizon of meaning” for our lives. It would indicate what in the world was significant and worthy of attention, of celebration, of pursuit.

The Christian faith is such a story. It begins before time. It is full of tension between good and evil, between God, sin and his people. It rises to the greatest tension on the cross and climaxes at the resurrection. It moves forward until it overtakes us and frames our lives and gives them a context and a point of reference. It also moves toward an end that resolves the tensions. It is a source of hope that gives one's life direction and determination for each day.

The challenge for the church today is to advance its story of the covenanting and creating God against the so-called stories of consumer culture. Its health and mission depend upon it.

The next chapter will take up that story and its major elements.

## CHAPTER 5

### FASHIONING AN ADEQUATE RESPONSE

#### ***Christian Understanding of Identity***

The last few chapters have been given to the analysis of consumer culture as it has developed through history and in its present form. This chapter turns toward a new direction as it looks to find an adequate response. Such a response must reflect a full, and thus Christian, understanding of human identity. Therefore, the chapter will begin the search for a robust response with a brief exposition of a Christian understanding of human identity. In so doing it will also supply the theological grounding and presupposition for this work. After outlining a Christian understanding of identity, the contrast between a consumer's identity and an explicitly Christian identity will be clear. The remainder of the chapter will then explore the subject of different approaches that the church might embrace to move from the former to the later.

Outlined in the previous chapters was how current identity is profoundly shaped in the tradition-less environment of advanced consumer capitalism, where branding plays a key role. A succinct summation can be found in the words of Tom Beaudoin, when he writes that branding “offers a consistent, coherent identity, in which you are told about your true self; it offers membership in a community; it issues an invitation to unconditional trust; it offers the promise of conversion and new life.”<sup>1</sup> In this way consumerism functions in the lives of consumers the way that Christ was intended to, as the source of identity, community, conversion and new life.

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<sup>1</sup>Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 44.

Now, before going further it must be said that the consumer self is not the last word on identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are millions of people, even in the United States, for whom it does not apply, in large measure, as they think about themselves and live their lives. Many people remain more rooted in tradition than not, more focused on producing than consuming, more committed to their spouse than society's demands. They continue in ways of life not represented by Madison Avenue. These ways of life are counter-cultural in that they exist in spite of the prevailing culture rather than because of it. These people must look to other sources for the support and sustenance of their way of life. And many people will continue in these ways.

Yet, consumer culture is the dominant culture, and insofar as it controls mass media, which is nearly total, it will continue to shape the lives and identities of its recipients in dramatic, if unforeseen, ways. The argument can be made that even many of those people who cannot afford to live a jet-set lifestyle still fantasize about such a thing. Even a poor single mother who works as a hostess at a chain restaurant will flip through a copy of *Cosmopolitan Bride* in anticipation of her wedding, even though she will not be able to afford anything in there. Therefore, even those who are not defined by consumerism are still shaped by it in dramatic and disturbing ways.

Moreover, if there is one thing that can be said about this culture, it is that it is not Christian. It shapes the identity of those within and without the church in ways that do not reflect the image of Christ. The way of Jesus Christ so sharply contrasts with consumerism that it requires little effort to list the ways that the two differ: Christ wants to give, the consumer wants to get; Christ was buried, the consumer buys; Christ suffers, the consumer shops; Christ does the will of the Father, the consumer delves into his or her own will; Christ looked at the heart, the consumer looks at the brand. The list could

go on and on.

Christian identity—in order to be Christian—must be oriented, not just toward Jesus Christ, but toward the God of Jesus Christ. In other words, it must be oriented toward the Triune God, whom we worship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Secondly, Christian identity must be historical. As is now clear, if the project of modernity and the Enlightenment was anything, it was the rejection of the past, and all that it entailed, especially as a tradition of beliefs and practices of specific communities. Consumer culture keeps perfect time with this conception of life, as it always seeks to throw off the past in order that it might replace it with new goods and experiences and attempts to foreclose the future to focus on consumption in the present. A Christian identity is irrevocably historical, as God has acted in the past in decisive and definitive ways, is currently at work in the present and will bring all things to their conclusion in the future. With these things in mind one might offer an outline of Christian identity as being founded upon the faith in Jesus Christ, enacted in the love of God the Father, and directed toward the hope of the Holy Spirit, all in the context of the missional community. Each of these phrases needs unpacking.

### ***Founded Upon Faith in Jesus Christ***

Christ is the beginning, the end, and the center, of all created things. As it says in Colossians 1.17, “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” He is also the beginning, end, and center of all that God has done for us and toward us. “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross” (Col. 1.19-20; cf. 2 Cor. 5.19). All acts of creation and

re-creation have their center and meaning in Jesus Christ. He is the center of creation, of history, and he is intended to be the center of each human life. Every person stands in some relation to him and therefore in some relation to God. Therefore, no account of our identity can proceed apart from him. The key question, then, is what is the nature of this relation?

According to the entire New Testament, the significant relation is called “faith.” “Only in the New Testament did ‘faith’ first become the central and comprehensive designation for one’s relationship to God, and especially that faith now entered into an indissoluble relationship to Jesus as the crucified and exalted Lord of the Church.”<sup>2</sup> Or, as Paul puts it in Rom. 5.1-2, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” It is faith in Jesus Christ that is itself the right relationship to God. The most significant category of identity then is whether one has faith or does not have faith in the Lord Jesus.

Christian identity is therefore not focused on the individual, but has its focus outside of itself, in Jesus Christ. We may say that it is eccentric, in two senses. First, there is the old literal sense of being “out of the center,” used for a planet whose orbit does not revolve around a center point. So, as Christians, our identity does not revolve around the core of our individual being, but around the God of Jesus Christ. Christian identity may also be described as eccentric in the usual sense of the word: “Departing from a recognized, conventional, or established norm or pattern.”<sup>3</sup> Christians by very

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<sup>2</sup>G. Barth, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (EDNT), vol. 3, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 93.

<sup>3</sup>The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

definition stand out of step with the world and society in which they live. Thus, as consumer culture says that the individual consumer is the center of all meaning and attention, we must dissent. It is not the consumer's will that is to be fulfilled but the will of the Father.

The church, moreover, must protest consumer capitalism's obsession with the present. Part of what it means to be centered upon Christ is to be turned to the past. As is evident in the words quoted by Paul above, it is the accomplished actions of Christ that are decisive for the present. Notice the past tense of "justified" and "obtained." As the gospels are at pains to show, Jesus Christ himself is the fulfillment of the prophetic promises of the old covenant. He himself stands upon earlier actions of God which form the context of his life and work. This orientation to the past, to the faith of the fathers, is destabilizing for a culture fixated upon the 'now.' Nevertheless, the completed nature of Christ's work is profoundly comforting. His work in the past is the foundation for our present. Our present is certain and secure because it rests upon a completed event. It is the "already" for our "not yet."

In these ways and others, Christian identity does not revolve around its own center, but actually comes from the outside, even as an "alien righteousness." It is not achieved, earned, or deserved (Eph 2.8-9). In the current climate it must also be said that it cannot be shopped for or purchased. It comes only from God as an undeserved gift. It unravels all economies and all systems of fair trade. Nor should it be called free, for it costs everything, even one's very life. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2.19-20). The acceptance of this gift is marked out and enacted in the community in baptism. Paul

draws on this practice as he makes his argument in Romans 6. The believer is submerged into the waters, representing the dying to the old self, with the full conviction that new life will be given according to the promise of the gospel. The new life that is experienced in the present is a foretaste of the full life to come. As in 2 Corinthians 5.17, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

This pattern of dying and rising, of mortification and vivification, is not incidental, but is the very pattern of Christian identity in this world. Our existence is cruciform. Therefore, there can be no acceptance of the consumeristic belief that life in this world was supposed to be convenient, safe and comfortable. The reverse is the case; it is meant to be full of adventure, risk, and self-giving. For, as we learn in the doctrine of creation, God limited himself through creating a time and a space for his creation. This was an act of love and self-giving.

### ***Enacted in the Love of the Father***

The creative act of love is fitting to God because “God is love” (1 John 4.8). God is not love merely by definition, but by action. From all eternity the Father has loved the Son in the Spirit, and the Son has, in turn, loved the Father in the Spirit. This is one of the reasons why the church has insisted upon the preexistence of the Son before the incarnation. Love describes the life of God, even apart from the creation. Augustine (354- 430 AD) even considered the Spirit to be the relation of love between the Father and the Son. Therefore, in so much as we love, we are like God. From the great hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13 to the greatest commandment given by Jesus, love is *the* ethical demand for the Christian.

The greatest commandment is to love and loving means giving, as typified in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” The Father’s sending of the Son and the Spirit is an act of self-giving. As he reveals himself in the life of each individual, it is an impartation, not merely of knowledge about him, but rather an impartation of himself that is revelatory and communicative. As creatures made in the image of God, we were created to love and love means giving of one’s self. To live in the truth of the identity of Christ is to live in and for love.

First and foremost, this means loving God. Since God has given himself to us, the appropriate action is self-giving, or offering, to him. “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). This self-giving to God is to be complete and total: “You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). The object competing for our love is identified as the world and the things in it. In the consumer culture that deifies desire, it is difficult to hear these words: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:15-16). The object of our desires becomes the key issue. Do we desire the things of the world that are marketed in such dazzling displays with all of the promises of fulfillment, or do we desire more of God? The human heart must continually be converted from love of this world to love of God, its true aim. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good

and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). This transformation is the ongoing work of God toward salvation called sanctification.

The second aspect of loving is to love others as we love ourselves. As Jesus said, “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:31). This goal is no more at home in a consumer economy than the love of God. There may be room for a bit of charity, but it should not interfere with loving oneself. Discerning what it means to love others is not as easy as it first appears. If we are to take the example of the “crucified God,” then we must acknowledge that it means giving of ourselves to others, even at great cost. This cannot be done merely with random acts of kindness. Instead, it requires commitment to the other’s good no matter what.

This kind of commitment is modeled in the Bible by God’s commitment and promises made to his people in the form of the covenant. As God identifies himself to Moses and the Israelites as YHWH, he identifies himself as “the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3.15). The three ancestors are those to whom the covenant promises have been given. It is as the covenant God that YHWH continues to have his relationship with Israel, his partner in the covenant. This relationship endures even though Israel is as faithless as a whore—YHWH is still faithful. The sending of the Son is the fullest expression of this covenant commitment as well as its completion. It is love for the covenant partner that drives God’s actions and purposes. This is the model for our love for one another.

As the covenant is the model for our commitment, once again we note the sharp contrast between this commitment and commitment as we analyzed it in our consumer society, where it was manifested only as a momentary choice of one thing over another, all for the sake of one’s own comfort, enjoyment or satisfaction. Commitment in the

covenant is commitment for good times and bad, in sickness and in health, in times of abundance and in times of want. It is to love the other person as you would love yourself.

The Father's love is fully enacted as he fulfills the promises made through the prophet Joel and sends his own Spirit into those who believe and follow him.

### ***Directed Toward the Hope of the Holy Spirit***

The Spirit is God himself given in us and who works in us the new life God promised (Rom. 8:11). However, the full realization of that life and of God's Kingdom will not come during this age, but during the next, when the Earth will be recreated. Therefore, a Christian's identity cannot be complete in this life but is oriented toward the future. The Spirit's very work points beyond this life. As theologian Colin Gunton put it, the Spirit is "the eschatological member of the Trinity, as the one who brings about in advance the perfection of particular created actions and things."<sup>4</sup> The Spirit's work is to manifest partially and in the present the creation that will be perfected in the eschaton.

Acknowledging the work of the Spirit means holding suspect any claim that promises complete fulfillment or satisfaction. Commercial advertisements relentlessly proclaim that the use of their product brings fulfillment and full satisfaction. All such promise can only be a lie. Perfection only comes by the Spirit and only fully at the end of the age.

But that is not to say that this world is to be denigrated. Gunton goes on to say, "Because the Spirit is the one who perfects all the creation, his work is centered on the enabling the ordinary, and especially ordinary life in human body, to be what it is made

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<sup>4</sup>Colin E. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 155.

to be.”<sup>5</sup> That the Spirit perfects creation means that the ordinary aspect of this life is honored and made to be important. It does not have to glamorized or romanticized, by being featured on TV, in a mall, or at Disney World. Ordinary life is important because God created it and the Spirit perfects it. Thus, much of life and work, with its mundane tasks and redundant chores, is more than a means to make a buck, but can be life-giving and God-honoring in and of itself.

The Spirit’s work is freedom, “because the Spirit’s law of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom. 8:2). To be free in this sense is the opposite of consumerism’s definition of freedom, which believes that freedom means being free to get what you want. Freedom through the Spirit is the freedom from being dominated by our wants, which only lead to death and destruction. Moreover, it is not just a freedom *from* but a freedom *for*: freedom for obedience, freedom for others, freedom for love, etc. Romans 8:12-13 says, “So then, brothers, we are not obligated to the flesh to live according to the flesh, for if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

It follows from this that one’s choices are anything but arbitrary. In fact, they could not be more consequential. They are a matter of life and of death. This freedom is also a freedom from a pointless life of endless consumption. The Spirit bestows a freedom to do the deeds which give life, not just to the believer, but through the believer to others. Acts of love and charity can give life and hope to others.

The experience of the Spirit’s work is a foretaste of what is to come. We live in the light of that future reality, thus we live lives of hope. A Christian’s life is marked by hope because it is lived in the full confidence of a glorious future. (Rom. 8:24-25)

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 156.

Christians celebrate and are renewed in this hope every time they celebrate the Lord's Supper. This sacrament is, among other things, a looking forward to the heavenly banquet, when all debts will be paid and all sorrows and concerns have passed away. It is a renewal and a refreshment for the road ahead.

As the church gathers around the table of the Lord it is a gathering of family, for the Spirit is the Spirit of adoption into God's family. According to Romans 8:14-16: "All those led by God's Spirit are God's sons. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, 'Abba Father!' The Spirit Himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children." This familial bond is deeper than any affinity based on common desires or consuming the same commodities. This bond is constitutive of who we are as creatures.

### ***All in the Context of the Missional Community***

The God who calls humanity into existence and gives it purpose is the triune God, always Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As recent theology has emphasized, we can think of God as persons-in-relationship, which means that God is communal in his very nature. The Father has been in community or fellowship (*koinonia*) with the Son in the bond of the Holy Spirit from all eternity. This divine fellowship is the definition of fullness and completeness. And yet, God chose to open that fullness and share it with humanity. Even though human sin broke this relationship, God ensured and fully accomplished this fellowship in the sending of the Son in the Incarnation and the Spirit at Pentecost. This God is not just communal but missional to his very core. Thus, it follows that God's humans should also live lives that are communal and missional.

From God's first call to Abram in Genesis 12, it was a call to become a special

people in a special place. They were to be the ones with whom God shared his presence and his promises. They were to be the recipients of his words and his way. But these blessings were not for them alone. It was God's original intention that they were to be a conduit through which blessings could flow to other nations and peoples. "Blessed to be a blessing" is the summary of the intent. God's interaction and calling of the well-known individuals—Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Ruth, Joshua, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah—was not for them alone. It was a giving of fellowship and purpose that God might do great things through them for the sake of his people. Jesus Christ himself is no exception to this rule. He came for his people. (John 1:11) He enjoyed the full and complete fellowship with the Father, and yet, for the sake of the world, he sacrificed even that as he utters the words, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15.34) and died a death in God-abandonment.

His twelve disciples represented the reconstitution of the people of Israel. To be his disciple means to enter into and live as part of that community. The extreme individualism that has come to define Western culture is in many ways incompatible with this understanding of the good human life. Human life is communal life and human identity is irrevocably communal. One could even say, "You are who you love."

This new Israel, the people of God, is the church. Paul was emphatic about this point. He writes in 1 Corinthians 12:27, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Being like Christ, and thus being fully human, means being a part of the community. This community is not just made up of the living, but also of the dead, of the "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12.1).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>According to Professor Mark Douglas of Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, the church has suffered from the Enlightenment's rejection of the past. Therefore he suggests four virtues for the

In community one finds nurture, care, formation and identity. In community one also nurtures, cares, forms and is involved in the identity of others. One is to use all of one's gifts and resources for the benefit of others. As Paul puts it, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12.7). As this Body, which is to be built up, is the Body of Jesus Christ, we are reminded that the end and goal of the church is to glorify Christ as he glorifies the Father and serves the world in the power of the Spirit.

### ***The Standard***

In conclusion, any attempt to cultivate this identity and help to make it manifest must reflect these theological truths. The identity cannot be turned in on itself. There is no room for the conception of a person as an autonomous individual, as if living in a vacuum or on an island. Christian identity, and therefore human identity, is relational. It is constituted by its relationship to the Triune God and to other creatures and to the creation at large.

These relationships with other creatures then suggest that a response should be communal in nature. A full-bodied response must deal with God's creatures as though they are part of his people, and so combat the cultural dogma that each one is an island. These criteria point toward the church as the locus of response.

A full identity is also historical. No one lives in an eternal present, but is shaped

church who wants to take history seriously—the first two directed to the past, the third for the present, the fourth to history: 1) Gratitude—This is an acknowledgment that we are where we are because of those who have gone before. 2) Forgiveness—The past does not perfectly fit our situation and so we should forgive those who have gone before rather than reject them. 3) Humility—We will not solve all the problems, ours or the next generation's, so we should have humility before others who have made attempts. 4) Hope—This is an acknowledgment that in the future Christ will make things right. He made these suggestions to the Emergent Theological Conversation in Atlanta, GA, on September 15, 2004.

by the past and the future in real and often profound ways. One's understanding of the past and his or her hopes and expectations of the future define the horizons of life. An adequate response should include some tangible form of continuity between the past, the present, and the future.

The effort to shape a new identity for those who are in Christ Jesus should also include aspects of sacrifice, commitment and mission. The endeavor of following Christ always leads beyond what is satisfying for an individual to what is life-giving for the world. It requires "a long obedience in the same direction." A Christian identity is one that follows the way of Christ and gives witness to the gospel of his life, death, and resurrection.

How can the identity defined above be made manifest in the lives of Christian consumers? What is an appropriate response to consumer culture given the truth of humanity expressed in Jesus Christ?

### ***Practice Makes Perfect***

Having outlined a Christian account of identity, the question still remains how those who are in Christ can live in ways that confirm and reinforce that identity from day to day, especially in the overwhelming flood of contemporary media culture. There are many Christian works given to analyzing consumerism and its devastating consequences upon the faith. They range from extending a warm embrace to the methods of consumer culture in a desire to use them for the gospel<sup>7</sup> to reasoned critique.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>An outstanding example of this approach is Ginger Sinsabaugh, *Act Now! Offer Ends Soon!: How to Be A Waling Advertisement for Jesus* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1999), in which the author recasts evangelism into an advertising project.

<sup>8</sup>Examples of reasoned critique include John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture: Escaping the Cult of "Choice" Invading Your Life* (Ross-Shire, Great Britian: Christian Focus, 1999), Tom Beaudoin,

The strong point of most critiques is their analysis of consumer culture and the ways in which it contradicts the view of life offered by Christianity. Their weaknesses reside mainly in their responses. Some focus on the differences of belief, namely in how each system views the world. As a start, this approach is highly praiseworthy. It is vital to understand the dangers that threaten our faith and to see how the narrative of the culture contradicts the narrative of the faith, not to mention the important (yet seemingly scarce) skill of understanding the ways in which the narrative of faith subverts the narrative of the culture. However, to end with analysis is inadequate for a couple of reasons. First, narratives and beliefs that are not held in common with a community of fellow believers are quickly transformed into aspects of one's own personal identity. They too soon become co-opted by consumer culture and transformed into mere commodities that one uses to try to mark out unique space in a world of standardization. This is true not only of belief and narratives but habits and disciplines as well.<sup>9</sup> One astute observer of consumer culture, Vincent J. Miller, whose work offers the best analysis and response to consumerism, commented on this process of "commodification," when he wrote:

Consumer culture forms people in consumerist habits of use and interpretation, which believers, in turn, bring to their religious beliefs and practice.... For that reason, Christian counternarratives, metanarratives, or even master narratives are in danger of becoming ineffectual and, more than that, of functioning as comforting delusions that are nothing more than a way for religious believers to

*Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2003), and Marva J. Dawn, *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), Michael Budde, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) and John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, Revised Edition, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Aside from the fact that they tend toward an individual response, two excellent recent books on this topic are David L Goetz, *Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) and Albert Y. Hsu, *The Suburban Christian: Finding Spiritual Vitality in the Land of Plenty*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

convince themselves that, appearances notwithstanding, their religious faith is impervious to the erosions of commodification. Indeed such reassuring narratives are very marketable commodities in the cultural turmoil of advanced capitalism.... [T]his system greets subversion and denunciation with mercantile enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup>

The marketers are always on the hunt for the next new thing, whether it is religious or not, in order to mass produce and merchandize it to make a buck. Christian narratives do not get an exception. Miller also hits on the second weakness of offering only a narrative: it neglects the ways that consumers are formed and shaped into consumers by advertising and shopping; practices which seem benign if one is looking only at beliefs, yet powerfully shape a determine contemporary life. As Bill McKibben put it, “What you do everyday, after all, is what forms your mind.”<sup>11</sup>

Other responses are more creative in suggesting activities that may be undertaken in response to consumeristic activities (e.g. tithing, Sabbath rest, serving others), or, acts of consumption that are undertaken more conscientiously (e.g. buying things which are fairly traded or buying from a local farmer). However, the weakness of many suggestions is that they tend to be individual solutions, that is, activities to be implemented by each individual as he or she sees fit. Unfortunately, as such, they are easily reduced to aspects of one’s “lifestyle.” Therefore, they become commodities themselves, just as beliefs and narratives do. Individual solutions play into the invisible hand of market forces. Moreover, a view of the person merely as an individual runs counter to a Christian view that always sees people as part of the community of believers.

An adequate response needs to overcome these deficiencies. The response would need to be thoroughly grounded in Scripture, and the story of the Scriptures, and yet be

<sup>10</sup>Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 179-180.

<sup>11</sup>Bill McKibben, *The Age of Missing Information*, (New York: Plume, 1992), 28.

manifested in specific practices that not only mold the Christian mind but one's day-to-day life. The response also needs a certain degree of focus and specificity. Responses that are grounded in individual discipline and practice may be effective for those with high levels of self-discipline. Yet, for most people they will fail to achieve the momentum and focus that can shape one's life. The most effective response ultimately needs to be communal. For, only communities are able to effectively pass on values to a succeeding generation. It is in community that we are truly human and truly ourselves. It is thus only as a part of a Christian community that we can live more deeply into our identity in Christ.

### ***Putting It into Practice***

It is the conclusion of this author that the best hope for an adequate response is that of developing a *practice*, in the ancient sense. “Practice,” as a concept, has received much attention by philosophers and sociologists.<sup>12</sup> Some understand practice in a narrow sense that can refer to almost any action that is meaningful to people.<sup>13</sup> Others use the word in the sense of an individual discipline.<sup>14</sup> Still others use it to refer to a whole set of activities which are undertaken by a group of people as they work toward a goal over time. This view’s greatest exponent and expositor is philosopher Alastair MacIntyre.<sup>15</sup> It

<sup>12</sup>A helpful discussion of the different uses by Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra can be found in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 2-20.

<sup>13</sup>For this sociological perspective see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>14</sup>See Margaret Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1988).

<sup>15</sup>Alastair MacIntyre in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Second Edition (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187. We shall be primarily using his concept of practice. Craig Dykstra goes through MacIntyre’s definition of practices and explicates each part of it, drawing out its implication of Christian education. See Craig Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practices,” *Shifting Boundaries*, eds. Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). See also Dorothy C. Bass, ed.,

is this last and grandest sense of the word possesses the most promise and which shall be used in this work.

To understand the idea of practice, it is helpful to define it as follows: *A practice is a coherent set of activities carried on by a group of people over time as they try to achieve excellence in its execution and to produce goods which serve a larger good.*<sup>16</sup>

One helpful illustration is to think how we use the word when we talk about the “practice” of medicine, or the “practice” of law. It is not just one particular activity like performing an exam or filing a brief. To practice, in this sense, is to engage a whole realm of knowledge, a community of people, a debate about issues and ethics, as well as standards of excellence. This not only applies to professions. Think also about these “leisure” activities, such as gardening, woodworking, quilting, performing music, golf, sailing, or running. They too have their own bodies of knowledge and wisdom. For example, consider the new language that one has to speak in order to be proficient in any of these areas. Woodworking has rails and stiles, mortises and tenons, as well as low-angle block planes. Music has ground basses, decrescendos, and arpeggios. Sailing has leeward jib sheets, crashing booms and spinnaker halyards. If you are not a practitioner of one of these activities, the terms probably seem Greek to you. But anyone who claims to be proficient in the practices must know those terms.

These practices are not comprised merely of words and information. Each one also has a set of tools or equipment, from orthopedic surgical implements, to garden trowels, to sand wedges, to skew chisels, and down hauls. Being proficient in the

*Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997) and [Craig Dykstra], *Growing in the Life of Christian Faith*, (Louisville, KY: Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, Presbyterian Church [USA], 1989).

<sup>16</sup>This definition is an adaptation of the one put forward by MacIntyre.

practice also means being able to use the tools to reasonable effectiveness. This use can be called a *skill*. Skills are a chief part of practices. They are often confused with practices, but one of the differences is that skills can be developed individually, while a practice is always a corporate affair. Nevertheless, skills are essential in that they consist in putting the knowledge to use in bodily activity. Skills always involve the body in some manner, even if it is developing the ability to sit stationary for long periods of time. Developing a skill means knowing something not just with the mind, but with the body. It is to have the “feel” of the thing. Advice about how to acquire the essential skills is the wisdom inherent to the practice.

As these practices exist over time and are carried out by people in different places, the different practitioners will have different ideas as to what counts as excellence in that particular practice. Some gardeners may champion the orderly ideals of the French garden while others will hold the English natural garden to be the ideal. For most practices there will be some discussion about the appropriate role of technology. Do tools with motors take away from the skill required for the practice? Should there be motorized winches, tillers, mortisers, sewing machines, etc? The discussion and even the ardent disputes, however acrimonious, are part of the practice. The conversation about what constitutes excellence is part of the practice itself. It makes up the tradition and history of the practice.<sup>17</sup>

Each practice also has some inherent goods, that is, things which are good for human life that result just from participating in the practice. There are other rewards that one can gain from being among the best practitioners, such as money, fame, and

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<sup>17</sup>Michael Polanyi elaborates on this understanding of skills as practiced over time and extends this understanding to the exact sciences, like physics and chemistry. See his *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958, 1962), 49-65.

influence. However, these are incidental and external to the practice itself. They are not unique and inherent to the practice. The achievement of excellence itself, whether in a product or in the act of producing, is an internal good.

Another set of inherent goods that arises for participants is the development of virtues. A good runner must develop perseverance. A good gardener patience. A good doctor has honed her listening skills. A good golfer must be self-controlled in order to put the thoughts of a bad shot behind him. The pursuit of excellence in a practice requires the practitioner to subordinate their varied interests and desires, and harness their passions in pursuit of their goal. This process results in a more well-ordered life.

Another type of inherent good is the joy that comes from the achievement of excellence. There is also the satisfaction that comes from the development of one's skills and abilities as well as the growth of one's capacity to do difficult and complex things. This happiness is not the goal of the practice but a by-product of seeking the goal of excellence.

In addition, engaging in a practice regularly yields a more ordered personal life. As noted earlier, one of the perils of living in a consumer culture is the state of being constantly distracted, where too many actions are undertaken on a whim with very little coherence with other actions. A regular practice results in good habits that provide goals, direction, and purpose in life. Practices help to provide the wisdom to discern what responsibilities one should take on and what activities to be engaged in. They provide a standard against which one can measure one's life.

It would be too small a thing to think only of the individual benefits, for as has been stressed, practices are communal in nature. The good of a certain kind of life does not just extend to the individual but to the whole community. Participation in a practice

means that one becomes a part of the community of practitioners. It means connection with other people. These connections take many forms. They may be face to face, say at a garden club or lawyer's association, or they may be indirect, through print or electronic media. Each one of the practices mentioned as well as thousands more all have magazines, journals, and websites dedicated to them. The readers or newsgroup members form a loose community. And the publications themselves are a key means of preserving and passing on the knowledge and wisdom of the community, usually from its experts to those less experienced. It would be impossible to maintain these practices in the absence of a community of devotees.

These communities and practices exist over time. Therefore, to be connected to the community also entails a connection to a past and a tradition. Different ideas of excellence tend to form into different schools of thought that wax and wane, compete for adherents, and sometimes disappear. Yet, these traditions give new life as they are re-appropriated in new circumstances and situations, as they provide resources for meeting new challenges and problems for the present generation.

The connections that result from practices go beyond relationships to other people. They often lead to a more intimate connection with the creation. A good gardener becomes attuned to the rhythms of the seasons and the ways that different plants interact with one another. He or she learns which bugs eat which plants and which plants prefer sun or shade. A woodworker becomes intimate with the feel and grain of different woods, how they all expand and contract from changes in humidity and temperature. She can feel whether a plane or gouge is sharp simply by the way it cuts. A good sailor is highly attuned to the clouds and the state of the sea. He can feel even a slight shift in the wind and how it affects the sails. A good doctor gathers untold information from a quick

glance at the patient's complexion or the feel of his skin. Good runners talk about listening to their bodies and running appropriately. Practitioners are drawn toward creation. They become familiar with its paths, its ways, and its laws. They know it with their whole body, not merely their mind. It is a connection between one's whole being and the creation. In this way they are activities that expand our awareness of our world and remind us of our place in it.

As stated above, these practices are intimately and internally tied to the goods that derive from them. While this seems a matter-of-fact statement, and an unsurprising one at that, it is revolutionary when contrasted to the logic of consumerism. Consumerism works best when everything has been reduced to a commodity, that is, when an object is valued for its ability to give one pleasure or fulfillment in a way that is ideally instant, safe and easy. One need only pay the purchase price at the local store or on the web and one is guaranteed the promised experience. There are no skills, no delay, no growing pains—just use the product and get the results. The constantly-repeated advertising promise says that the newest technology will give you the “goods” without the effort. You can get a beautiful garden, the fitness of an athlete, the perfect golf swing, instant navigation on the water, or a beautiful piece of furniture, if you will only give your credit card number. Forget the steep learning curve of golf or learning all of the complexities of map reading and compensating for magnetic variation on compasses. You can get the results without the effort, as long as the price is right.

A moment's reflection will reveal that these promises are a lie. One may get a narrow slice of the goods without effort, but not the full range of goods. The sense of satisfaction from great accomplishment only results from the practice, regardless of what the commercials say. One cannot experience the joy of mastering very complex details

of the practice through a purchase. Nor will one be a person of increased capacity or skills. The swipe of a credit card cannot transform somebody into one of the community of practitioners. In fact, the community of producers will more likely be the workers in large factories in the third world. Moreover, one will not discover oneself fully engaged with the fullness of creation and so, by extension, with a clearer sight of the Creator.

Quite the opposite. There will be another layer of technology interposed between the user and nature. This is not a call to do away with technology. Technology has undoubtedly done humanity much good. Instead, it is a call to realize what is lost when too much confidence is put in the promises of advertising and the wonders of technology.

This work began by chronicling the loss of a secure identity that was provided by the traditional society, which is long since passed in the West. Also lost was a sense of authority, community, stability, and meaningful work. The best hope for securing these human goods that are integral to a full sense of identity comes from engaging in practices. Craig Dykstra concisely sums up what is at stake when he writes,

“Our identities as persons are constituted by practices and the knowledge they mediate. Some of these are so central to who we are that we cannot give them up without our very existence undergoing transformation. Correlatively, communal life is constituted by practices. Communities do not just engage in practices; in a sense, they *are* practices.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, for the sake of identity in a consumer world, every effort should be made to pursue practices, as a community, for the community as a whole, as well as for each of its members. By pursuing excellence in practices one can expect to reap many goods, not the least of which is a good life.

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<sup>18</sup>Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practices,” 47.

## ***Making A Practice “Christian”***

Up until this point, the understanding of practices that has been described was not explicitly theological, and thus was incomplete. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra have helpfully put the understanding of practice in a theological framework. They defined Christian practices as follows: “By ‘Christian practices’ we mean *things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.*”<sup>19</sup> There are two corrections that are immediately apparent.

First, Christian practices must acknowledge that it is God who is the initiator of all revelation, salvation, and glorification. Human actions, including practices are properly seen as responses to the power of God’s presence and purposes in and for the world.

The second corrective stems from the first. Christian practices are not just about any human goods, but those goods which address the fundamental needs of humanity. These needs are disclosed in God’s revelation to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus the Messiah did not come to meet the needs that Jews wanted met: the need for national sovereignty or the need for condemnation of the unrighteous. Rather he came to meet their deepest need: their alienation from their Creator and their captivity to sin and to death. In the same way, Christian practices must take their cue from God’s work and revelation in Jesus Christ and constantly aim at meeting the most fundamental needs. Miroslav Wolf has suggested five needs that might be considered fundamental: communion with God, solidarity with nature, tending to the well-being of one another, the development of moral

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<sup>19</sup>Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in Wolf and Bass, 18.

capacities and practical and intellectual skills, and the new creation, the kingdom of freedom.<sup>20</sup> All of this is a reminder that it is Jesus Christ who is the norm and standard for all that we do, including our practices.<sup>21</sup>

The aspect of practices that is not included in the definition of Dykstra and Bass is that of excellence. The idea of excellence attends to the intrinsic qualities and standards of the practice—how the practice is measured. As has been pointed out, this cannot be done in complete isolation from the extrinsic standard of Jesus Christ. Excellence usually implies some form of human mastery, either over raw materials or of a technique or outcome. But excellence in the Christian life can never be a matter of mastery. The life of faith is always and everywhere a response to the previous life-giving action of God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. Jesus Christ is the Lord and Master and so Christians are his servants and followers. The utmost in this service is faithfulness. Excellence in the Christian life is best thought of as faithfulness.<sup>22</sup>

For a congregation pursuing a practice, therefore, it will be imperative that there be an ongoing discussion as to just what constitutes faithfulness. The advantage that faithfulness has over that of excellence is that with faithfulness it is clear that responding to God's call faithfully in the here and now will look very different than responding in a different time and place. Members would ask questions like, "What is God calling us to do in this place? How can we be faithful to God's call to us to serve the people we find around us?" The answers to such questions would push such a congregation into very

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. Taken from Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 152-154.

<sup>21</sup>"Thus the internal constitution of a *Christian* practice points to the story of Christ as its external norm." From Miroslav Volf, "Theology for a Way of Life," in Volf and Bass, 250.

<sup>22</sup>This author indebted to Craig Dykstra for this insight and for those that follow from this. See Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999), 75-77.

specific ways of life and mission.

As a congregation pursues faithfulness in practices it would be helpful to keep in mind the twin doctrines of justification and sanctification, two sides of the Spirit's work of grace within us.<sup>23</sup> Sanctification suggests that in the pursuing of the excellence of faithfulness it can actually be achieved. By the Spirit's gracious action God can and does take up our human actions in such a way that they actually bear witness to his glory. When these practices are done in the will of God by the power of the Holy Spirit they bring glory to Jesus Christ. Practices can be that space into which God imparts his gift of presence. In other words, they can be a means of grace.

The concept of faithfulness also maintains a standard against which practices are measured and against which they will inevitably fall short. Thus, the excellence of faithfulness should lead to confession and repentance by the practitioners. Failures in practice open us ever anew to the grace of justification. For it is only because of the acceptance given to us in the divine "yes" of Jesus Christ that a community could continue in a practice, trying and failing and repenting and trying again with joy and thanksgiving. Practices are carried out with the freedom to fail.<sup>24</sup> This is also the freedom to risk, to dare, to experiment and innovate. In this way Christian practices do not merely model the dynamics of sin and grace of the story of God. They themselves "share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace."<sup>25</sup> They become the places in which the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit meets us anew.

Some practices that the church has undertaken throughout its life include worship,

<sup>23</sup>In this regard Serene Jones, drawing on John Calvin, has perceptively linked the idea of excellence with sanctification. See Serene Jones, "Grace Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life," in Volf and Bass, 61.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>25</sup>Dykstra and Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in Volf and Bass, 27.

interpreting Scripture, hospitality, service, keeping Sabbath, and singing, to name but a few. A congregation does most, if not all of these. Any of them would be worthy practices for a congregation to pursue as it attempts to live intentionally as an alternative to the world. Each one of these could use a full exploration and investigation to understand their many facets and their potential. Such an investigation of each possible practice is beyond the scope of this work. However, the investigation of one practice could serve as a pattern and model for the discovery of the depths of other practices. This exploration of one possible congregational practice will be the focus of the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE PRACTICE OF HOSPITALITY

#### **Possible Practices**

The preceding analysis leads to the conclusion that the best way to combat the invidious effects of consumerism is at the level of the local church. Believers must hang together or else they will hang individually. It is likely the culture that is produced in a worshipping congregation that can act as a counter-weight to the dominant culture of consumerism. This counter-culture does not just emerge as a matter of course. It must be targeted intentionally. As has been argued here, the best way to form this alternative culture is by focusing the congregation's heart and mind through a practice. In the working out of the practice the congregation's attention is expanded into the past and the future, connected to other believers. The practice also connects the theology and mission of the church in a concrete way. Believers as practitioners become more than consumers. They become producers, producers of the common good. The question then becomes, which practice?

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in practices as a focus of congregational mission and purpose. One website lists the following practices as promising possibilities for a congregation to pursue: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, forgiveness, and singing.<sup>1</sup> Just from the breadth of this list one gets a sense that almost any activity could

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<sup>1</sup>See [practicingourfaith.org](http://practicingourfaith.org), which is sponsored by the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, a project whose purpose is to develop resources to help contemporary people live the Christian faith with vitality and integrity in changing times. The Project is ecumenical in orientation and appreciative of the legacies of a range of Christian traditions. We sponsor grant programs, seminars, books, conferences and web sites for adults and youth.

count as a practice. In order for one of these activities to count as a practice for a church, with all of the accompanying benefits, it must be held to be central to the life and mission of the congregation. It must be the object of sustained attention and focus. Otherwise, it will be just one activity among others. Moreover, the practice must be connected in a very conscious way to the meaning and message of the gospel.

Some in liturgical traditions have put forward the celebration of a communion as a worthy counter-cultural practice. There is no question that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is central to the life of these congregations as well as being directly connected to the gospel. Yet, as a simple survey of liturgical congregations will reveal, celebrating the sacramental meal is not enough to create a congregational counterculture. Something more is needed. The sacrament would need to be consistently explained as being inherently counter-cultural, including specifically defining the ways, which are many, that the Lord's Supper defies a consumeristic logic. An added challenge is that this activity can only be celebrated, and therefore participated in, while in worship. This effectively cordons off the practice in a sacred zone in contrast to the everyday lives of the participants. There are surely ways to overcome this, such as emphasizing daily meals as means of grace, but it would not be easy. However, no practice is easy and it would benefit the church at large if different congregations would embrace different practices and so that the body might be built up.

While there are a plethora of possible practices, some choices seem to show more promise in the contemporary situation than others. One particularly strong choice is the practice of hospitality. The reason for this choice is that when hospitality is appropriately conceived, as will be shown, it puts its practitioner in contact with "the least of these": the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner, the stranger, and the alien. There is nothing like the

contact with other human beings who are much worse off in life to break the spell of advertising. Seeing a child starving or a family living in a shanty town forces a consumer who regularly compares their situation to the rich and famous to compare their situation to the poor. In the light of this new comparison the consumer is in a position to realize that things that have been considered needs are merely wants and desires. While this insight is not enough in itself, it creates a greater possibility of action, of grace, and of hospitality toward those that are less fortunate. Insight coupled with action is a significant step in altering one's perception of oneself. Identity, then, does not have to be manifest in the collection of branded objects but in the expression of Christian love toward those who are also made in God's image. This can only happen when Christians are exposed to those who are worse off materially. And, for their sake, the worse off these others are the better.

For the sake of illustrating how one activity can meet the demands of being a practice and how such a practice might look in a congregation, this final chapter will explore the hope of hospitality.

## ***Practicing Hospitality***

The practice of hospitality has a very long history. It therefore meets one of the criterion for what makes a practice, an activity continued over a significant period of time. Throughout its history practitioners have engaged in discussions over what counts as hospitality; what is its essence and its apex. One contemporary practitioner who has added significantly to the conversation, as well as added to a renewed attention given to the practice, is Christine Pohl. In her book, *Making Room*, she writes, "Hospitality is a way of life fundamental to Christian Identity. Its mysteries, riches, and difficulties are

revealed most fully as it is practiced.”<sup>2</sup> Pohl presents hospitality as a “tradition.” He definition of tradition fits nicely with the description of practice outlined in this work. As is evident in her statement above, she also holds it to be vital to living out a Christian identity, one of the fundamental concerns of this present work.

Pohl begins her book by engaging the long tradition of hospitality and converses with those who have written on the topic. She points out that hospitality was widely conceived as a fundamental moral component of their social world. It was regarded as necessary to society and the protection of the vulnerable. Through the offering of hospitality, strangers were assured of at least a minimum of food, shelter and a connection to the larger community. She comments, “It also sustained the normal network of relationships on which a community depended, enriching moral and social bonds among family, friends and neighbors.”<sup>3</sup> Hospitality was seen as an obligation and sometimes even a moral trust.

Nevertheless, there were also other perspectives on hospitality. The Roman Cicero urged the well-off and well-respected to open their homes to guests who had similar standing. In the long tradition of hospitality there have regularly been times when the practice shrank to the small notion of entertaining those who might then return the favor. In this vein hospitality becomes a means of getting ahead, or at least not falling behind. However, “the distinctive quality of Christian hospitality,” writes Pohl, “is that it offers a generous welcome to the 'least,' without concern for advantage or benefit to the host.”<sup>4</sup> Christian hospitality begins and ends as a response for what God has done for us. It is motivated by a sense of gratitude. It is a giving-back for what God has already

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<sup>2</sup>Pohl, x.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 16.

given. Therefore, its telos is in the good of the other person, rather than in one's own good.

It bears repeating that one act of kindness to the needy is not itself the practice of hospitality. The practice is “coherent set of activities” of an entire community, carried on over a period of time along with a conversation about what exactly comprises the practice. Wolf and Bass articulate this well particularly in regard to hospitality,

The practice of hospitality, as we understand it, also encompasses, among other things, the Biblical stories that have shaped the way in which the hosts perceive their guests; the specific habits, virtues, knowledge, and other capacities of mind and spirit that the hosts bring to the situation, many of which could have developed only within the context of the practice itself; the liturgical words and gestures that make manifest in crystallized form the hospitality of God to humankind and our obligations to one another; and the domestic hosting that prepares family members to break bread with strangers in less familiar surroundings as well.<sup>5</sup>

Hospitality cannot be a “random act of kindness.” Rather than being an isolated incident, each offering of hospitality is a scene in the history of the welcome of God, rooted in the welcome that God has graciously extended to this people. The act is given a determinative shape by the fact that all of God's people were formerly “strangers and aliens,” therefore, the stranger is really one just like them. To extend hospitality to the stranger is to do something “for people like me.” Practitioners of Christian hospitality also see their efforts as part of the ongoing work of the Spirit, who is reclaiming the world in small ways until it is reclaimed finally and perfectly. Hospitality, moreover, is a moment in the process of sanctification in the life of a believer. To extend hospitality is to die to the old self, bent inward, and to be raised to new life which exists in the giving away.

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<sup>5</sup>Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in Wolf and Bass, p. 19.

## ***The Need for Hospitality***

As noted earlier, the common use of the word, hospitality, in the present day, refers to the hosting of dinner parties or the like. It includes the reception of friends in a warm environment. It is a rather private affair. Alternatively, it also refers to a whole industry—the hospitality industry. The sector of the economy includes hotels, resorts, conference centers and the like. It is the outsourcing of what hospitality has traditionally represented.

In our individualistic society we have turned hospitality into a private affair where one entertains friends, or has them stay as they are passing through. In this sense it is merely an extension of one's private tribe. At the same time, people usually travel to places where they cannot stay with others and so we have the hospitality industry. It caters to the consumer who can shop around and find just the right place at just the right price. However, neither of these actually turns strangers into friends. In the former those who are entertained are already friends, or at least acquaintances. In the later one is merely purchasing shelter and protection for the night. In many cases people choose a hotel *because* it offers anonymity.

The transformation of hospitality in the modern world has been vividly described by Robert Meagher:

Hospitality has become a harmless urbane quality in the order of . . . civility, politeness, and table manners. It is on the verge of being regarded as a matter of personality . . . not far removed from the peculiar oblivion spread ever wider by our obsession with the particular and private. If we manage, across some period of time, not to be rude to our friends within our own house . . . then we are deemed hospitable. . . . We forget that properly hospitality has to do with unrecognizable strangers rather than with kith and kin.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public*

Consumer culture is a powerfully individuating and isolating force. Each person is encouraged to focus on their own preferences and lifestyle and to bond with others who share those interests and aspirations. Marketers and advertisers continually divide the population into tighter and tighter segments. The physical layout of suburbia also adds to the isolation with its sprawl, its privacy fences, and the tendency of residents to enter and exit through the garage and never see their front doors. The result of all of this is a lack of connection and a sense of community. There is always the need for strangers to turn into friends. Some people looking for a spouse have turned to the Internet, often with success. But how will strangers living near each other, in the same community, meet and interact as equals?

As Christine Pohl has pointed out, even this characterization of everyone as a stranger in our mass society can have negative effects and make real hospitality to come by. For, if everyone is a stranger then there is no host. “When we describe everyone as a stranger, we wash out some of the crucial distinctions between socially situated persons and persons who are truly disconnected from social relations.”<sup>7</sup> According to the traditional understanding, those who had a “place” were morally obligated to be hospitable to those who did not. In advanced consumer capitalism, being connected to the marketplace and the economic system is to have a “place.” Those who do not have such a connection are at great risk of being invisible to the larger society. There are more than just strangers, in the sense of being unknown, but also are those without a position in the society. Pohl goes on to explain how the structures of consumer culture exacerbate this problem.

<sup>6</sup>*Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 67.

<sup>7</sup>Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 90.

Such invisibility is compounded by contemporary living arrangements that allow many of us to choose carefully who will enter our private worlds. Communities or neighborhoods developed around particular “life-styles” help assure that the people we and our children encounter on a daily basis are much like ourselves in education, race, and socioeconomic background.... For many of us, it takes intentional effort to intersect meaningfully and personally with strangers different from ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

The lifestyles that go the core of identity in consumer culture are in the end quite insulating, insulating us from others who do not share that lifestyle. Again, it becomes clear that the private tends to trump the public in consumer culture. Parker Palmer has powerfully argued that for a strong communal and political life we need to interact with strangers. “When we meet the stranger, we are engaged in public life, and through such engagement, according to the Scripture, gifts of the Spirit will be brought into our lives.”<sup>9</sup>

The practice of hospitality commands itself in a consumer culture because it is by very definition non-commercial. If one pays for hospitality, then it is not hospitality (contrary to what the industry might claim). Hospitality can only be freely offered and accepted. Granted, you might give a “thank you” gift, but it is understood by both parties that such a gift does not count as compensation. Hospitality is a non-commercial exchange, where the participants give and receive for reasons other than monetary.

Hospitality is also inevitably personal. It is the interaction of human persons and the level of need. This too is counter to consumerism which operates at the level of want and desire. To confront a person in need encourages one to compare themselves and their situation to that of another person who has less, rather than the picture presented in advertising who has accrued much, which thus engenders jealousy and a feeling of lack, rather than contentment. Moreover, one who is prepared to offer hospitality welcomes

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<sup>8</sup>Pohl, 90-91.

<sup>9</sup>Palmer, 57.

the stranger, whoever he or she might be. Choice is minimized and total control is given up. Offering hospitality very often entails giving more than one is initially willing to give.

The practice of hospitality also runs against consumer culture in that it refuses to deal in commodities. To welcome another human means to take into account their unique needs and circumstances. Each person has his or her own history and story. Nor can you dish out the same helping of hospitality to each person. Take for example the welcoming of people into a congregation. Some first time visitors want to be greeted, welcomed and would not mind a visit by the pastor that very week. Others want the freedom to remain anonymous and to make contact when they feel ready or comfortable. Hospitality is not a program. It is a willingness and an openness to accept people as they are and a desire to make them feel wanted and cared for.

To extend hospitality to someone in need can cast a harsh light on the values and outlook of consumerism. When we invite a stranger in, we are being confronted by a different world, not only different from our lived world, but also different from the ideal world created for us by advertisers with their vision of plenty. Extending hospitality to a child from the inner city or a foreign-exchange student can be jolting. “When we learn that the stranger has never had a room of his or her own; when we learn that our simple house appears as a palace to the stranger; then we begin to understand how our use of scarce resources is related to the ways others are forced to live,” writes Palmer.<sup>10</sup> The practice of hospitality shapes its practitioner’s view of the world to be more in line with the way that God paints it, as opposed to the picture painted by marketing. It responds to the world as broken, rather than perfect.

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<sup>10</sup>Parker, 69.

There are other ways in which hospitality is counter-cultural which shall be pointed out in the elaboration of hospitality that follows.

## ***Hospitality in the Bible***

The theme of hospitality runs through the entire Bible. It is a moral duty. It is a reflection of God's activity. It is a part of the gospel. Hospitality brings blessings both on those who share as well as receive hospitality.

Abraham is a prime example of someone who is blessed due to welcoming a guest. He himself was “a stranger in a strange land.” Genesis 18 recounts the story of when he welcomed three strangers from the desert. These strangers turned out to be God himself. During that encounter God renewed his promises to Abraham and Sarah, who were blessed by the word and presence of the Lord. Abraham who was a stranger himself extended welcome to others strangers.

Abraham thus serves as the model for the way that the entire nation of Israel was to view itself. The Law required that they show hospitality to strangers, *because* they had been strangers in Egypt. Just as they were under God's protection, so were the strangers in their midst.<sup>11</sup> The Bible praises many others because of their hospitality, including Lot (Gen. 19.1-18), Laban (Gen. 29.13), Rahab (Josh. 2), and the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4.8-11). Hospitality “is so highly regarded that in Isaiah 58.7 it is preferred to fasting, and Job commends himself for it (31.31-32).<sup>12</sup>

Hospitality is no less significant in the New Testament. Hospitality provides context for much of Jesus' ministry and teaches. He is often found enjoying the

<sup>11</sup>See Exodus 23.9; Lev. 19.33-34 and Deut. 10.17-19.

<sup>12</sup>Abraham J. Malherbe, “Hospitality,” *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 293.

hospitality of others, where he is found teaching. Furthermore, it was part of his teaching. Jesus answers the question posed to him, “Who is my neighbor?” with the story of the good Samaritan. The neighbor is the one who is in need. Part of what it means to love them is to meet their basic needs and to show hospitality (Luke 10.29-37). Later in the same gospel, Jesus tells the story of the man who gave a great banquet and invited the worthy one to come and dine, but they declined with many excuses. He then sent his servant out to the needy and invited them. In this story, Jesus teaches that receiving the gospel is like receiving hospitality when you are not of the same social status. If you are not willing to receive such hospitality, then you will not taste the kingdom (Luke 14.15-24).<sup>13</sup> There is an ethical imperative which flows from this: “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14.13-14).

Somewhat surprisingly, hospitality always seems to be a two-way street. As Abraham Malherbe points out, Jesus expected to receive hospitality for himself as he was constantly staying in other's houses.<sup>14</sup> He even received the hospitality of Zacchaeus the tax collector, another unworthy person in Jewish eyes (Luke 19.1-10). It is also clear that he expected hospitality to be extended to his followers who preached the gospel.

To be a follower of Christ one not only gives hospitality, but you also must be prepared to receive hospitality, as Christ and his followers did. In Matthew 10.40-42 Jesus says,

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<sup>13</sup>See also Luke 13.22-30 which uses the same metaphor of hospitality, but emphasizes the rejection of God and equates it with being denied hospitality to those who come to a house too late at night after the doors have been locked.

<sup>14</sup>Malherbe, 293.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

What is clear is that the great spiritual blessings come both to those who receive hospitality and those who extend hospitality to others. They will receive the reward that a prophet or a righteous person might deserve. The one who extends hospitality will receive a reward that will not be lost.

Again, hospitality in this perspective is the extreme opposite of a commercial exchange. Christians should not look to extend hospitality to those who can repay and if they do extend hospitality those the less fortunate, they will receive a treasure and a blessing that is far beyond their deserving. Moreover, they must be willing to receive hospitality and grace as one who does not deserve it, as one who could never afford to repay. A community of Christians who practices hospitality establishes ways of relating and of seeing others that are subversive in a consumer culture.<sup>15</sup> To be a practitioner of Biblical hospitality requires that one view oneself as an undeserving of grace and hospitality, which is radically different from view oneself as a consumer, whose primary objective is to satisfy one's own desires because “you are worth it.”

Hospitality was also a vital concern in the early church. In the letters of the New Testament exhortations to extend hospitality occur regularly (Rom. 12:13, 20; 1 Pet. 4.7-11; Heb. 13.1-2). Traveling Christians stayed not in inns but in private homes (Acts

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<sup>15</sup>Christine D. Pohl writes, “Because the practice of hospitality is so significant in establishing and reinforcing social relationships and moral bonds, we notice its more subversive character only when socially undervalued are welcomed. In contrast to a more tame hospitality that welcomes persons already well situated in a community, hospitality that welcomes “the least” and recognizes their equal value can be an act of resistance and defiance, a challenge to the values and expectations of the larger community.” (Pohl, 62)

21.4-8, 15-16; Philem 22). Extending hospitality to fellow Christians is depicted as participating in the mission of the gospel (3 John 5-8). A special form of hospitality was the opening of one's home to the whole congregation for worship. For centuries Christians met in the home of one of the members of the congregation. House churches are frequently mentioned in the New Testament (Rom. 16.3-5; 1 Cor. 16.19; Col. 4.15; Philem. 2).

What stands out in a survey of the presentation of hospitality in the Bible is its overlap with the gospel. To receive the gospel is like receiving an invitation to a party. Waiting too long to accept the gospel is likened to waiting too long to ask for hospitality. To host a missionary is to participate in their mission of extending the gospel. More than that, it is to receive the blessings of God, and in fact, to receive Christ himself (Matt. 25.31-46). In Revelation 3:15-20, Christians are warned that thinking of oneself as rich, prosperous and in need of nothing is to believe a lie. The truth is that all are “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (v. 17). According to what Jesus has said in the gospels, these are the kinds of people that need hospitality. Yet, the answer to these deep needs is to play the host and receive Christ: “Behold, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (v. 20). To understand the gospel one must understand hospitality and to understand hospitality one must understand the gospel.

## **A Definition**

In order to practice hospitality it is helpful to have a clear idea of exactly what is being pursued. A definition of hospitality was offered by Fred Bernard and Steve Clapp. It reads, “Hospitality is the attitude and practice of providing the atmosphere and

opportunities, however risky, in which strangers are free to become friends, thereby feeling accepted, included, and loved. The relationship thus opens up the possibility for eventual communion among the host, the stranger, and God.”<sup>16</sup> This definition emphasizes that hospitality is equally about meeting relational and social needs as it is about physical needs. To extend hospitality is to welcome people who have found themselves on the margins of society into the society, whether on a large or small scale. Life at the margins often means being invisible to the larger society. Therefore, an essential part of hospitality is the offering of recognition to those who are otherwise invisible. Welcoming them conveys an acknowledgment of them as persons who are deserving of recognition and even honor.

However, the danger always lurks in this sinful world that hospitality might have the opposite effect. To be always in the position of needing to receive from other people can cause a person to feel demeaned and even debased. Therefore, those who practice hospitality must always keep in mind that Biblical hospitality is always a two-way street, with each party both giving and receiving.

One of the early fathers of the church, John Chrysostom, writes helpfully on just this point. John Chrysostom on hospitality,

The stranger requires much attendance, much encouragement, and with all this it is difficult for him not to feel abashed; for so delicate is his position that whilst he receives the favor, he is ashamed. That shame we ought to remove by the most attentive service, and to show by words and actions, that we do not think we are conferring a favor, but receiving one, that we are obliging less than we are obliged.<sup>17</sup>

This critical point must be born in mind to prevent hospitality from merely

<sup>16</sup>Fred Bernard and Steve Clapp, *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality and the Vital Congregation*, fourth edition (Fort Wayne, IN: LifeQuest, 2004), 22.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Pohl, 69.

strengthening existing social distinctions. If the gift of hospitality always flows in one direction from the “haves” to the “have nots,” then the giver always has the power and the receiver is always dependent. This dependency will often create the shame that Chrysostom refers to. A Christian view of hospitality must always see it as a two-way street. The host might give food or lodging, while at the same time receive friendship. Or even more appropriately, the very *giving* itself is a blessing to the host. It is more blessed to give than to receive. If the host operates on this assumption, every act of hospitality will convey the appropriate sense of humility and honor. The assumption that the receiver too has something to share with the host can be powerful. Pohl has observed that an “important transformation occurs when people without power or status have the opportunity to be more than guests, when they, too, can be hosts.”<sup>18</sup>

Hospitality, then, is about far more, but not less than, meeting physical needs. It is about more, but not less than, meeting social needs. When undertaken appropriately it also includes spiritual needs. It is about treating the “other” as the child of God. When this is done right, it can also *convey* to them that they are children of God, even when, indeed especially when, they do not feel like they are. The extension of hospitality, then, can be a powerful form of evangelism. Treating another human, who might be “one of the least of these,” as you would treat Christ himself, is a powerful expression of love. It imparts a sense of dignity and worth that speaks to being made in the image of God.

## ***Getting Practical***

This chapter has covered the theological and theoretical aspects of hospitality. Next, it will turn to a proposal for what the practice of hospitality might look like in a

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<sup>18</sup>Pohl, 121.

local congregation. This proposal can only be suggestive since every congregation has its own history, its own mission, and its own collection of habits and values, which will ensure that no two congregations who set out to practice hospitality will do so in the same way.

To begin, a church must commit to make hospitality as central feature of their common life is they are going to reap all of the benefits which accrue from a practice, as opposed to a mere program or activity. To bear fruit over the long term this commitment must be one that is born of knowledge. In other words, the members should know what they are getting in to. A commitment to practice hospitality will be the most productive if those who are making the commitment fully comprehend all of the costs and benefits of doing.

Therefore, it would be advisable to begin with an investigation of what the practice of hospitality is all about. This inquiry should be undertaken by the primary decision making body of the congregation, or perhaps initially by a long-range planning committee or the like. Such a group might begin by reading Christine Pohl's book. They would then go on to study the Biblical passages pertaining to the practice of hospitality. Some of these were touched on above, but overall number is quite large. Their study should result in a formulation of just what Biblical hospitality means and what it requires. These results can then be shared with the larger church. If they have done their job, there should be "buy in" from the larger church, as they come to understand the Biblical mandate to practice hospitality as well as the positive power of the practice.

The next step would be solidify this enthusiasm through a larger commitment. This determination might take the form of a new or revised mission statement, which would declare to members and visitors alike that hospitality is central to the life and heart

of the congregation. Such a mission or vision statement should be constantly in front of the congregation, e.g. on bulletins, posted in the hallways, on the website, on the top of budgets, etc. Decisions about the life and mission of the congregation would then be made with consideration for this commitment. In making decisions the questions should be asked:

- Would this new direction help us to be more welcoming?
- Is this expenditure solely for the benefit of our members? If so, can it be reworked so that it also serves our guests?
- Does our budget reflect our commitment to welcome the stranger?

From this point there are several different directions that a church could follow. The original study group could reconvene and begin to consider what form hospitality might take in their particular congregation and context. They would then bring recommendations to be implemented. Alternatively, the results of the initial study might be given to the various committees. The committees would use the material to undertake a study of their own. The goal of such study would be for them to integrate the practice of hospitality with their ministry and responsibility. In some instances this may mean adding certain elements to their ministries. For example, a Sunday school class might elect a couple of their members to serve as greeters, who would welcome all members and guest as they arrive and then follow up on visitors, much in the way a church's pastor often does. Or, being more hospitable might mean the discontinuing of some activities if they are deemed to make hospitality more difficult. It is essential that every group in the church regularly give time to consider how they are embodying the welcome and acceptance of Jesus Christ. Special attention should be given the a visitor's experience on Sunday mornings as this is the primary entrance for new people into most American

congregations.<sup>19</sup>

In order for hospitality to become and remain a full-bodied practice, the congregation as a whole must be mindful of it. It is difficult to conceive how this could be the case unless the topic gets regular treatment in preaching. The pastor could kick the whole effort off with a sermon series devoted to hospitality in the Bible. (Some examples are humbly included in Appendix I.) To be most effective these sermons should issue forth in practical application, so that the congregation can practice what is preached.

Such an application might include a challenge for every family in the congregation to have another member or family over for dinner one time in the following six weeks. That would mean that many families would have served as both host and guest in those six weeks. After the first six weeks were over a new challenge could be put forth. This time every member or family would be encouraged to take a visitor to the church out for lunch after church. What an amazing effect that would have on visitors if they were not only greeted at the door of this prospective church, but also invited out to lunch following the service! They could never say the oft-repeated phrase, “I visited that church but not one person said a word to us and so we never went back.”

Special attention should then be given to the mission of the church. In some ways it is easy to extend a welcoming hand to new comers as they represent potential resources for the church. Once a visitor commits to the church they might be expected to give money to the budget. They might bring a wonderful dish for the next potluck supper. Or, they might be the next small group leader. All of these things are wonderful. Yet, it is in the very nature of *Christian* hospitality that it reaches out to those in need. It goes

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<sup>19</sup>There are many books which aim to assist congregations in this. For example, take Andrew D. Weeks, *Welcome! Tools & Techniques for New Member Ministry* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1992).

beyond mere entertaining those who might be a benefit to us in the future to serving those who are in need and who may never return the favor.

A church must ask, “Who has God put in our path whom needs to feel his welcome? Who is our neighbor?” Neglected children or those with special needs, abused women, pregnant teens, and persons recovering from a severe illness or in the latter stages of terminal disease can be welcomed by individuals or single families. People who are isolated or distant from family and friends need a welcoming place, the warmth of a shared meal, a family that will adopt them. International students, foreign workers, college students, and soldiers far from home can easily be drawn into a welcoming household or church. Others who might be seen as neighbors are elderly neighbors, families who have recently relocated, individuals whose families are destructive, and persons recovering from some traumatic experience. Some strangers most in need of companionship, recognition, and care characteristic of hospitality are hidden in prisons and in facilities for extended care. To reach these people requires a willingness to enter their world, and to accept the role of the stranger who brings friendship and comfort. In a similar way, persons who serve on hospice teams enter homes as strangers but enable the family of the dying person to provide hospitality to their loved one.<sup>20</sup>

One possibility that should at least be considered in present-day America is the immigrants, particularly those from Mexico and Central America. They are strangers in a strange land, and without a place. They are often taken advantage of. To many people they represent more of a drain on communal resources rather than an asset. There is increased rhetoric about how illegal immigrants constitute an incredible burden on the

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<sup>20</sup>This section is drawn from Pohl, 101.

nation's education system as well as on social services. While this may be the case, the gospel will not allow us to treat the immigrants next door without hospitality just because they are a part of some larger group. The 10 children of migrant workers who are living in a trailer, may or may not represent a burden on our social infrastructure. Regardless of that fact, the gospel calls us to consider how we might show them hospitality. Some churches have become advocates for immigrants, even offering them sanctuary. This by no means exhausts the possibilities. A church may choose to operate a kindergarten for such children and in so doing actually *lessen* the burden that they would be on a public school. Such children would feel welcomed by Christians. They could be presented with the gospel. They could begin to learn English so that if they were enrolled in public school their language would not put them behind, which would require more from their teacher. By this simple gesture their parents too would feel served and accepted, as parents in all cultures want their children to be cared for, nurtured, protected and instructed in the things that will help them to get ahead in life. This in turn might lead to the offering of English classes to the adults.

If a congregation engaged in such a ministry, it would surely have a transformative effect. It would require significant resources in time, money, energy, and building use. It could only be accomplished if the congregation saw it as an outworking of their commitment to hospitality and therefore their commitment to the gospel. They would also discover the lesson learned by Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18, that hospitality to the stranger brings a blessing on oneself. Jesus taught this in Matthew 25.

One of the great strengths of hospitality as a Christian practice is that it is relevant to every level of the congregation. For an individual family to practice hospitality they do not have to be actively involved in an church activity as they can practice it at home.

They can look around to their neighbors and have them over in order to help create a sense of community in the neighborhood. Those with children might make a point of having all of the kids in their children's class over to dinner during the school year.

There are no limits to the opportunities that hospitality might take advantage of. These suggestions are intended to stimulate the imagination.

## ***Final Thoughts***

Some final thoughts are in order. In 1848, Karl Marx wrote about the advance of capitalism in the Communist Manifesto, which he refers to as the bourgeoisie.<sup>21</sup> He observed market forces leveling the old orders of respected professions.<sup>22</sup> He also noted the weakening of the traditional bond between family members as he wrote, “The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation into a mere money relation.” Marx shows himself to be very clear-sighted in his observation of the trajectory of capitalism, for his predictions have been born out in the conditions of advanced consumer capitalism.

In the same work he notes how the conditions of production will be constantly changing and therefore so will “the whole relations of society.” This “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions” will result in “everlasting uncertainty and agitation.” This work has catalogued many of those societal changes. Then, Marx records some of his most memorable words,

All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before

<sup>21</sup>Kuhn, Rick “*Manifesto of the Communist Party.*” 14 Site revised 11/14/2006..Available online at <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>. Viewed 5/10/2007

<sup>22</sup>“The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers.”

they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.

In these two sentences Marx sums up the whole history of consumer capitalism, even though he was writing at the beginning of it. He saw the first effects of capitalism as it undercut the standing of tradition. He witnessed the processes whereby new attitudes and fashions are swept away and replaced before they can take on the honorary aura that only time can bestow. Old is always being replaced by the new, not just in production and in consumption, but in relationships and identity as well. The old solidities have become liquid and then gaseous. (This is not a bad description for the process of digitization that is now going on.) At the end of the day the vertical world of religion is being flattened and the sacred has been profaned.

The one prediction of his that has not come true is that one day the workers of the world would realize the situation that these processes had put them in and then rise up in protest and revolt. The only revolt these days seems to be the demand for more. Perhaps it will still come.

Nevertheless, Marx sees one more trend that we must not miss. It is the unrelenting nature of the market to conquer the world. He says, “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” And he concludes ominously, “In one word, it creates a world after its own image.” While he would not put it this way, there is something sinful and demonic in a process that unceasingly creates the world in its own image, including those creatures that were made in God's image and likeness.

The analysis and the solutions put for in this work may not be correct. They may

only be partial solutions that miss a larger point. To the extent that they are misguided and unhelpful the author wishes they would perish into oblivion. Nevertheless, the effects that advanced consumerism are having on our collective soul is undeniably corrosive. Some solution must be found. Perhaps it is a practice different than has been envisioned here. Perhaps it is not in a practice at all. We all must beseech the Lord of all life to lead us away from this temptation that we cannot resist and so to deliver us from its evil, so that his church might truly be the church and his disciples might follow him with all their hearts, minds, souls and strength. Fortunately, his will be the glory forever and ever.

## APPENDIX I

### The Welcome of God

### **Ephesians 2: 11-19**

A Sermon Preached by Monte Johnston at  
 Clayton Presbyterian Church,  
 Clayton, North Carolina  
 November 12, 2006

#### ***Foreign Hospitality***

In college I went on a mission trip to Russia. There were so many new things that I saw that made an impression on me. There was the fear and mistrust the people felt after Communist rule. There were churches that were 1000 years old and still standing! There was both beautiful and depressing architecture. But more than anything else, the thing that left a lasting impression upon me was their hospitality. We were hosted in many people's apartments and served meals. It didn't matter how well-off the families were, the meals were always a banquet. And while it took me a while to figure it out, I learned a valuable lesson—when in Russia, do not clean your plate. I was doing it because I thought that it was polite. For them, it was the responsibility of the host to make sure that their guests always had food. So, I would clean my plate, they would pile more on. You can tell that it became this vicious circle as I was getting fuller and fuller. I must have gained 10 pounds that summer. They knew about hospitality.

What they knew is that hospitality is not just about food. Food is not an end in itself. It is the means to an end and that end is the making of strangers into friends. They served us food as if we were family. They made us feel at home, like we were one of them. And so they overcame the barriers that divided us, which many times was a language barrier. We often communicated with one another through sign language, as if we were playing the longest game of charades on record. Nevertheless, we became friends. Do you know that this is exactly what God did for us? Listen.

#### ***Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:11-19***

**11** So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—**12** remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and

strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

**14** For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. **15** He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, **16** and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. **17** So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; **18** for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. **19** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.  
(NRSV)

To understand this passage you need to think of two groups that are completely separate, like Tarheel fans and Wolfpack fans. If you are from North Carolina, you just can't be a fan of both teams. It is either one or the other. If you love the one, you are required to hate the other.

### *The Great Divide*

In our text there are two groups: the Jews and Gentiles, or Jews and non-Jews. It was circumcision that drew the distinction clearly between the two. It was the outward sign of an inward division. Circumcision marked off who was “in” and who was “out.” Scholar William Barclay described just how intense this division was:

The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he had made...It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 125.

Now to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears this just seems like nationalism, or even worse, racism. Nevertheless, as ugly as this seems, it was under girded by a deeper theological reality. To understand this, we need to go back to the beginning.

It was in the beginning when God created the world and all that was in it, including humans, and it was all good. It was we who rejected God. We sinned. We rebelled and decided that we wanted to do things our own way. We filed for divorce, citing irreconcilable differences. Those differences being the fact that God was not going to enable our disruptive and destructive behavior. We created a wall of division between us and God. It is a testament to his love for us that he let us go and did not force us to follow him. As much as we would like to play down the division between us, to minimize the consequences of our sin, we can't. Our sin creates something akin to the Grand Canyon between us and God.

Did God leave us in this situation? No. Instead he created and called a particular people, *through whom* he was going to save his creatures, to redeem the world, and to restore things to their rightful order. This was to be the Jews special mission. They were God's chosen people. So, on the one hand, they were right to have an attitude that there was something distinctly, and divinely, different about them. On the other hand, they let it puff them up and they were filled with pride and hubris, instead of love toward their fellow creatures. They had forgotten that they were only chosen because of God's grace, not because they were better.

### ***The Dividing Walls***

This division between the Jews and non-Jews was also visible in the Temple in Jerusalem, that most holy place where the Jews met God. The temple was centered around a series of concentric circles. Only the high priest was allowed all the way in the center, the Holy of Holies. Outside of that was the court of the priests. Then there was the Court of Israel, the one for Jewish men. There was another one for the women. But outside of all of these was the courtyard was where the Gentiles were to remain. There was a wall between them and where the Jews could go.

In our text this morning, Paul is explaining what Jesus did through his resurrection. He saves us from our rebellion. He forgives our sin. He heals our wounds. He destroys the power of death. But then in the passage we read Paul is unpacking things further. He

says that Christ has removed the division between the two groups. He has torn down the dividing wall. He has made peace where once there was only hostility. He did this by taking the judgment of God on himself. Jesus was God's chosen one, a Jew among Jew, but he was also became the outsider, the one under judgment, when he went to the cross. That is how he united the two groups in his body on the cross.

When we read this we need to remember that we were the outsiders. We were outsiders. We were the foreigners. In verse 12 Paul tells us to remember that we were the foreigners, the strangers, the aliens. We were the ones under the judgment. We had no hope of remedying the situation and we were without God in the world. But now, declares verse 13, “*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*”

But God has showed us hospitality. In verse 19, “*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.*” Before we met Christ, we were the outcasts, the strangers, and the aliens. But now, we have been included in God’s people. We have gain citizenship in God’s Kingdom. We now have rights and freedoms. We have been included into the family. This is what hospitality is all about.

That’s why one powerful way to understand what God has done for us in Christ is to think of it as hospitality. He has overcome the strangeness, even the hostility, between us and he has made us one of his family. We are no longer outsiders, but insiders. We have received the welcome of God.

### ***Being Hospitable***

What do we do with this? I want to suggest two things. First, it says that Christ came proclaiming peace. We, believers, have heard that message and have received that gift. We should then become proclaimers of that same peace. We should help other people to understand what has happened in Jesus. That he has remade humanity, so it is no longer a collection of competing tribes, but a unified whole in him. We should help others to understand and experience the good news of Jesus and the cross, so that they too come make the move from outsiders to insiders, so that they don’t have to be strangers and aliens. But they can become the friends and family of God. Do you know someone that needs to hear the good news this week?

Secondly, we need to express that truth in our actions. We need to practice hospitality. We need to extend the welcome of God to those around us. Consider the actions of Phyllis Williams.

### ***Phyllis Williams: A Refuge for Refugees***

"What we did wasn't that remarkable. We just learned to move over," says Phyllis Williams of University City, Missouri, outside of St. Louis. In 1980, while living in Illinois, Phyllis and her family began "moving over" for the next seven years to provide housing for 32 immigrants.

"At that time, the plight of the 'boat people' fleeing from Cambodia and surrounding countries got my attention," Phyllis says. "I had just quit my teaching job, so I had time to become involved. Refugees were literally being dumped anywhere." When the sponsor for a Hmong family of six dropped out, Phyllis and her family stepped in. "This widow and her five children had lived primitively. For the three months they shared our four-bedroom house, we learned rice *can* be eaten for every meal. Our Hmong family always complained of being hungry if rice wasn't included. Rice goes well with vegetables, meat, and yes, it's great with spaghetti sauce!"

Pantomime sufficed for simple communication. When Phyllis found an Asian grocer, her house guests went shopping with her to point out items they recognized. Because Phyllis and her family wanted to share the underlying reason for their hospitality--their love for Christ--most of the foreign guests attended church, too.

Grateful for the temporary quarters but lonely for the fellowship of other Hmong, the family eventually moved on. Today they live near Boulder, Colorado, and are active in the local Hmong Alliance Church.

The departure of the Hmong family made room for a stream of international wayfarers--Ethiopians, Cambodians, and a Laotian girl. That girl recently completed her college education and affectionately calls Phyllis and her husband, Edward, "Mom and Dad."

Empty-nesters now, Phyllis and Edward keep in contact with their extended family through letters and visits. Phyllis admits she didn't grow up wanting to be a missionary, but she wouldn't trade her "home missions" experience for anything. We

were just giving some strangers a start in a strange land."<sup>2</sup>

The Williams extended the welcome of God to those who were aliens and strangers in a strange land.

### ***Discerning Our Call***

How might this church extend the welcome of God to the strangers in our midst? We are surrounded by new residents who have moved here from other parts of the country. There are an incredible number of Hispanics who have moved here looking for work. How might we show them the hospitality of God to these aliens? And what about their children? Can we use our building in the service of community groups who need a place to meet?

More personally, how might we use our houses as vehicles of hospitality? By global standards, our houses are mansions? How might we use them to be vessels of God's hospitality? Even more personally, many of us enjoy warm family lives. These are an amazing blessing and gift from God, especially when there are so many who would give anything to have such a family life. How is God calling us to be good stewards of our family lives? Perhaps it might mean something as simply as inviting a family to share Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner with your family.

We have received the welcome of God. That is what Jesus was about, welcoming us back to God, even though we had rejected him. As those who have received such a gift, we should talk about pray, asking God, "What do you have for us to do to extend your welcome?" This is our purpose.

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<sup>2</sup>*Christian Reader*, "Ordinary Heroes."

**Receiving the Greatest Gift**

John 1:1-12

Preached by Monte Johnston

Clayton Presbyterian Church

December 24, 2006

***No room in the Inn***

It was just about 3 months ago when we added our third child to the family.

Kari's pregnancies are considered high risk and so the plan all along was that she would be induced at about 38 weeks. So, at 37 weeks, while we were at the weekly doctor's appointment, we made an appointment to be at WakeMed the next Wednesday morning at 9:00am. All we needed to do was to call an hour before we came. During the course of that week we were frantic making arrangements as to who would be watching our girls. We finally got it all ironed out. The big morning came. However, when we made our phone call, which we thought would just be a formality, we were told that we couldn't come in. Too many women had come in already in active labor and so they weren't taking in any inductions.

That's right. Kari was pregnant and there was *no room in the inn*. In fact there was no room in the inn for another 3 days. Apparently the end of September is a very busy time. While we were there they told us that they had sent one woman home three times, and she was a week and a half over due! That's what happens when there is no room in the inn.

Christmas Eve has got to be the most famous time when there was no room in the inn. As Mary had traveled to Bethlehem with Joseph, the time came for her to give birth, but there were no vacant places. There was simply no room for them.

The Son of God came into the world and there was no room for him. We will see that this was not only true literally, but also in a larger and more significant way.

But before we read our text, I wonder if you have ever felt shut out and not included. There is not too many things that sting as much as this. I believe that this is why middle school is so unpleasant for so many kids. Each kid wants to be included and so they do everything in their power to elbow the other kids out of the way.

But this phenomenon is in no way limited to teenagers. We all feel left out at

different times—not getting invited to a party that you really wanted to attend, or being a part of a play date, or being invited to a conference?

Have you felt like there was no room for you?

**Scripture: John 1:1-12**

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. **6** There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7** He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8** He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. **9** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **11** He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. **12** But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. (NRSV)

***They Did Not Accept Him***

There was no room for him in the inn. Jesus did not receive a warm welcome in another sense; the world that he created did not receive him. John begins his story of Jesus by talking about the Word of God, which is the Son, the second person of God. And he and God the Father created the world. They designed it down to the last detail. They ordered it with the laws of nature. They filled it with such wonderful creatures. It was good and beautiful and true. Then, they topped it all off with their masterpiece, us. That's right. They made humans, but they made us special. We were made in their image. We bear the stamp of God.

But, then comes the painful part. In verse 10, it says, “*He [the Son of God] was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.*” Imagine going to visit your own child for Christmas. When you arrive at the door, you are met with a blank stare. This child of yours, who looks just like you, doesn't recognize you. How painful would that be?

It gets worse. The text goes on to say, “*He came to what was his own, and his own people didn't recognize him.*” This is saying that he did not just come to the world in general, but he came to the Jews, his own specially-chosen people...and they rejected him. That would not just be a blank stare, but a door slammed in your face.

There is a note in my Bible that tells you that verse 11 can be translated differently. It can be read as saying, “He came to his own home.” That would be even worse, coming home from a long day and being rejected at the door of your own house, the house that you paid for by the family that you provided for. The insult! The shame! The rejection!

This is what happened in Jesus’ life. God stepped into the world to live with us and we rejected him. The absence of any kind of welcome at the moment of his birth was just the first in the whole pattern of his life that concluded with the cross. For, it was as he was crucified on the cross that he received his utter and final rejection. His creatures didn’t want him around. They didn’t want him interfering with their affairs. They wanted a God who was far off and remote so that they could live their lives the way that they wanted.

### ***Will We Receive Him?***

We may wonder at how they could do such a thing. So cold, so heartless! Yet, we are just the same as them. The question that they had to answer, would they welcome the God into their world, is the same one that we must answer. For, we too live our lives the way that we want to. Most of us want just enough of God to make us feel religious, to make us feel like we are good people. But we don’t want God in all his challenge, in all of his uncomfortable fullness. Nevertheless, God wants to come into our lives and our world just as he did 2000 years ago. In Revelation 3:19-20, Jesus says, “Listen, I am standing at the door [of your life], knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me.” Jesus wants to live in your life.

This is the greatest present that you could receive this Christmas. But will you receive it? Sometimes we have trouble receiving gifts.

### ***Oh...A Suit***

Several years ago I had trouble receiving a gift. I am an occasional woodworker. That year I was really into getting more tools. I love not just power tools but hand tools as well, like chisels and planes. I had a whole list of things that I wanted. I was looking for Christmas to add to my collection. As I was opening my present for Kari, my wife, I was trying to figure out what tool she wrapped in this very big, but very light box. When I finally got the bows and paper off, I said, “Oh...a suit...,” with very little enthusiasm. Kari could see that I was quite disappointed. My reaction took all of the joy out of it for

her, as she knew that I needed a suit. She had shopped around and purchased just the right suit in just the right size. She had invested a great deal of herself in the gift. But I didn't receive it, even though she was right. I did need it and I have gotten far more use out of that suit than I ever would have out of any tool. It was my fault that I didn't receive the gift.

### ***But He'll Accept You***

This is how we have treated God. He has given us all that he could give—himself, but we did not receive it. But, just as I got another chance with the suit, because Kari didn't return it, even though she had every right to, so we still have a chance with God. Down in verse 12 of John chapter 1, it says, "*To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.*" To all those who trust him to know what is best, to know what is right, who believe in the saving power of his name, he gives the power and right and the privilege to become his children.

If you will receive him, and he will receive you. Then, you can know the God of the Universe. You can know God, who created you and designed you, who knows you better than anyone else, and if fact, who knows you better than you know yourself. We all struggle, at times, with the fact that people don't really know us or understand us, but God does, and he wants you to know him.

If you will receive him, he will receive you. This also means that you will be part of his family. He calls you one of his own. When this happens, gone is any idea of being left out. You are in. You are part of the family. He claims you and calls you his own.

Yet, as with any guest, you have to make room. For God to come and live in us, we have to be willing to let some things go. God comes and claims all of us. His coming was an interruption in the way of the world. His coming in your life might also come as an interruption.

### ***Receiving the Guest***

There's a wonderful story that took place years ago in Philadelphia. An old couple come into a hotel at 11:00 on a rainy night and asked for a room. If you were that night clerk, you could say, "Are you crazy! It's raining outside, 11:00 at night; you have no reservation. Why are you bothering me? I can't help you. We're filled up."

Instead, the night clerk said, "We don't have any good rooms; they're all gone. But I'll tell you what: I have a room here. It's not much, but I'll have Mary, the night

housekeeper, clean it up and put some flowers in there. Wait here a few moments. I'm sure you'll be comfortable for the night. I hate to send you out in this rainy night."

Mary came back and said, "The room is clean."

Then the clerk said, "Now you two can go upstairs, and I'll have some hot tea sent up for you."

The strange thing is that a year and a half later, when the great Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York was built and finished, John Jacob Astor, who was the man who with his wife came to the hotel that night, said, "I want that night clerk to manage my hotel."<sup>3</sup>

If we will accept Jesus, what seems as an interruption into our lives will turn out to be the greatest blessing in our lives.

Receive Christ, the gift of God himself, this Christmas! If you will receive Jesus this Christmas, God will welcome you. He will not just welcome you into his home, but into his family. If you receive Jesus, he will receive you. Jesus says that if you will live in him then he will live in you. So, make room in your life tonight.

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<sup>3</sup>Bruce Larson, "When Your Enemy Prospering," Preaching Today, Tape No. 78.

**How to Love Your Neighbor**  
**Genesis 18:1-15**  
Monte Johnston  
Preached at Clayton Presbyterian Church  
Clayton, NC  
January 7, 2007

***Traveling in Style***

It was estimated that 65 million people were going to travel over the holidays, with 53 of those doing so on the road. We joined those ranks when we decided to travel to Charlotte on Christmas day. We knew all the information we needed for the trip. According to Google maps it is 186 miles and should take about 3 hours. Aside from the added adventure with kids, it is such an easy trip. There are countless places to stop for gas and you could have your choice of whatever meal you would like. If we had hit a huge ice storm, we could have gotten a room in a hotel and waited for the DOT to clear the roads.

A traveler in the ancient world would have had none of these conveniences. There were no fast-food restaurants or hotels as we knew them. Roads were always subject to bandits and robbers. In some areas it was so dangerous that it can easily be said that traveling was a life or death proposition.

It is for this reason that people throughout the Mediterranean world regarded hospitality as so important. The provision of food, lodging, and protection for strangers was considered a virtue and a sacred duty. The following were common components of the act of hospitality.<sup>4</sup>

- Bowing: In receiving a desert guest, the host would often bend at the knees and gradually lower his or her body until touching the ground. This act revealed the host's desire to render the highest possible honor to the stranger-guest.
- Feet-washing: People wore sandals, and a day on the desert meant dirty, hot, and often sore feet. Washing the feet was an act of kindness which conveyed honor to the guest.
- Preparing and serving food: The host might devote considerable time and expense to preparing food for the guest. The generous Bedouins were known to deny

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<sup>4</sup>From Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp, *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality & the Vital Congregation*, fourth edition (Fort Wayne, IN: LifeQuest, 2004), p. 26.

themselves for the sake of the guest. The host's family ate later from what remained. The thoughtful guest always left a portion of food on the dish.

- All guests were seen as potential friends: Obviously the stranger can represent a friend or an enemy, but the starting assumption in the Ancient Near East was that the stranger was a potential friend. Names were not exchanged until after the meal was eaten, if at all. An exchange of names and background information was not considered a requirement for hospitality.

The Bible story that we are going to look at today is all about hospitality. This is no coincidence. The Bible actually has a great deal to say about hospitality. In fact, it is a key part of what it means to be a Christian and to live in a way that God wants us to live. It is part of the gospel Listen to the story of Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel, and how he acts towards strangers. Listen also for God's Word to you.

***Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15***

**1** The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. **2** He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. **3** He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. **4** Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. **5** Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." **6** And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." **7** Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. **8** Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

**9** They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." **10** Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

**11** Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. **12** So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" **13** The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" **14** Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." **15** But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

(NRSV)

### ***Abraham the Host***

The story begins by telling us what Abraham himself doesn't know—God himself comes to visit him. But Abraham doesn't realize this; he just sees three strangers. As he sees them, he *runs* from the opening of his tent and falls down before them. He does them great honor by falling at their feet and begs them to stay with him for a while so that he can show them hospitality. How different is this from our usual perspective! He views it as a privilege to be able to serve them. His attitude is born out in that he refers to the chief guest as lord and refers to himself as their servant.

This is a key part of hospitality as we learn about it in the Bible—it is about respect. It is not just about meeting peoples' physical needs. It means to treat them with the utmost respect. It means to treat them in accordance with the position, that is, as those who bear the image of God.

Back to the story, Abraham offers them some water and the opportunity to have their feet washed—quite a luxury when you are in the desert in the heat of day! After that they can have some bread for the journey. They agreed.

Sarah got busy making the bread. He had a servant prepare a roasted lamb along with curds and milk. He served them far more than just bread but a tasty feast. That is hospitality.

Hospitality is a lost art. And I don't mean entertaining. We still do that. But meeting and serving strangers is just not something that we do these days. It feels too risky, too dangerous. But as we have stopped practicing this art, we are also missing the incredible power of hospitality. It can transform relationships in amazing ways.

### ***A Coke and a Smile***

Most advertising that we see are full of bold-faced lies. They don't lie about their products. They usually do what they say that they're going to do. They lie about how they are going to change our lives. Think of all of the claims about how technology will make our lives more simple, less busy and easier to manage, or how all of the educational toys will make our children into little Mozarts or little Einsteins.

There was one claim, however, that I initially discounted and later found to be true. Do you remember those old commercials for Coke where all of these people from different nationalities and walks of life would share a Coke and things would be great.

The claim was that Coke could bridge cultural barriers. My first response was, "Oh, give me a break!"

Then, several years ago I was in Haiti with some high school students that I took on a mission trip. We spent a couple of days building forms and pouring concrete for a guest house where future mission teams could stay. But, we also made trips up the mountain to a small village where the missionaries ran a school in conjunction with a local church. We spent some time with some folks in that village. A couple of the young men led us up and down some very steep terrain as they showed us all the work that was being done to rebuild the watershed from the drastic erosion. We also accompanied the kids of the school on a day off for swimming in these waterholes that are some of the most beautiful places that I have ever seen.

The day before we flew out we went up the mountain again and found that they had set a beautiful table to serve us lunch. I think that it was a mixture of rice and beans. But there in front of every plate was a bottle of Coke. That old familiar beverage was so welcome to us who had been living in a strange land. It was so humbling. These people who live in abject poverty were pulling out the stops and showing us such deep hospitality. These Haitians who are fortunate if they can live in a cinder block shell were giving us drinks that were not cheap for them. In so doing they were treating us like honored guests. We, who can buy a Coke at any time and never think about it, were served the best by people who can hardly afford anything. They honored us that day in ways that I will probably never understand. But they did so in a way that I will never forget. And I definitely left Haiti having received far more than I gave.

Hospitality can change people and can surely change relationships. Jesus went toe-to-toe with the Jewish scholars of the day over who it was ok to eat with. They wanted to draw a tight circle around who you could eat with, but Jesus would eat with anyone. They both understood that eating with someone else is powerful. It can forge a strong bond. That is exactly why he did it, because it represented that God's grace and forgiveness is for anyone and everyone. It is for the prostitutes. It is for the drug-dealers. It is for alcoholics. It is for the unemployed. Any kind of person you can think of. If we are going to walk the life that Jesus wants us to, we need to eat with those people who are uncomfortable to eat with.

***Pastor Challenges Church to Be Colorblind***

Think of all the things that divide people in life. Can eating together overcome those divides? Pastor James Meeks thinks so.

Meeks, who is the pastor of Salem Baptist Church in Chicago, hopes to persuade African American and white evangelicals to work together. And so he is encouraging them to take the bold step of eating together.

"I want my children to see that," Meeks says. "Most black children grow up never having had dinner with white people. Most white people grow up never having had African Americans in their homes. So we view each other as 30-second sound bites on television."

Meeks says he'd like any church, anywhere, to take Salem up on this offer. "We can do it with ten [families], do it with five, do it with those that are willing. It has to get started somewhere. The world will never see how colorblind Jesus is until they see how colorblind the church is."<sup>5</sup>

Meeks has looked to Jesus and thinks that his church should follow his example. And he knows the Bible well enough to know that if we will do so then we will be blessed in powerful ways that we can't even imagine. Don't you want God's blessing on your life?

### ***Abraham Was Blessed***

Abraham in our Scripture reading was blessed. After he had served his guests, the Lord asks him where his wife Sarah was. Abraham had to be wondering, "How did you know that her name was Sarah? I didn't tell you. Did you read her name on our vanity license plates on our camel?" But he just says that she is in the tent. God then tells him that when he comes back in a year, then she will have a child. When Sarah, who was listening in tent, heard this she just busts out laughing. This was the funniest thing that she had ever heard. She was an old woman. She had not had a child after all of this time. She had accepted it now. It is just ludicrous. So...

**13** The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" **14** Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." **15** But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

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<sup>5</sup>Bob Smietana, "MegaShepherd," *Christianity Today*( February 2004).

Of course she did have a son and she named him Isaac, which means laughter. Sarah did laugh and rejoice when she finally had a son. And it was God who had the final laugh because he knew that all things were possible for him. So at this encounter, Abraham and Sarah had God's promises renewed to them. They once again heard the Word of God. Why? Because they offered hospitality to strangers. If they had not they would not have been blessed by God's presence. Because they were willing to share from what they had, to be a blessing to others, they were blessed.

### *Dinner Guests Becoming Scarce*

How willing are we? A May 2005 survey produced the following answers to the question, "How often do we entertain guests for dinner?"

Once a week—6 percent

Once a month—21 percent

More than once a month—12 percent

A few times a year—37 percent

Rarely or never—24 percent<sup>6</sup>

That is not a lot. And our family would be right along with those figures.

What we know from the Bible is that Jesus ate with sinners and tax-collectors. That means that in the eyes of a good Jew, he ate with those who were unworthy and disgraceful. What more powerful way could Jesus communicate to them about the grace and forgiveness of God than by eating with the unworthy.

We too can be examples of God's grace to those around us by extending hospitality to the unworthy. By inviting someone over, it is like giving them an invitation to the Kingdom of God. And I am not talking about having your boss over or some business associate. There is a time and a place for entertaining like that, but it is not hospitality.

Consider who you might have over to your house for a meal. Can you think of someone who can really use it? Hospitality used to be the way that Christians cared for the poor and the indigent. Because our houses have become such private places, it is

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<sup>6</sup>"Snapshots," USA Today (6-6-06), D1.

more dangerous than it used to be. Nevertheless, the Scriptures present hospitality as an obligation and a mandate. Why? Because it goes to the heart of what God has done for us. He has welcomed us to his table, which we are going to celebrate here in a moment as we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

What we need is a start. We need a small step before we can take a big step. I want to give you one. I would like to challenge each of you to share a meal with someone else in church sometime over the next six weeks. Look around and find someone whom you have met at church. Then, ask them over for dinner. What better way to have a strong, vibrant church where we know each other and not just come and sit near each other once a week. Then, as we get more comfortable, we might ask God to put other people in our path. Wouldn't it be great if we were the kind of church who would regularly ask visitors to join us for a meal after church. I know that it has happened here before. But what if it happened all the time? It would be amazing!

We must follow God's example and welcome others, because he has welcomed us to his table, even though we are not worthy, to share the great feast and fellowship with him. He plays the host and he serves us. Let us come to his table.

**Serving Christ**

*Matthew 25:31-46*

*Preached by Monte Johnston*

*Clayton Presbyterian Church*

*February 4, 2007*

***My People***

Not being a native Southerner there are a number of southern phrases that I have had to learn since living in the South. For instance, when we first moved down, Kari and I moved into a newly refurbished apartment. There was a sign over the thermostat which read, "Don't cut on the A/C." Having never done any kind of cutting with an air conditioner, we didn't know if that meant turning it on or off.

I was a bit less confused when someone told me to "mash" a button. There aren't many things that you can do with a button, so I figured that one out by myself.

I really like phrases like "talking ugly" and "bless his heart." Northerners tend to view phases like this as being too indirect and not saying what you mean, but I think we could use a bit more civility.

There is another southern phrase that was new to me. I first heard it from an older couple who have both since talked away. They were telling me about their roots in the area and said that "their people" had lived in the county for generations back. They used the phrase, "my people," when referring to their extended family.

I am aware that they did not invent this phase, for it has been used over the years whenever people wanted to talk about groups to which they belonged. Even today, some folks talk about their "peeps." So I was wondering, who would we consider our "peeps?" Who are your people?

For those of us who are Christians, we would have to include fellow Christians in that. For all of those who trust Christ, we have become part of his chosen people. We belong to that group just as much as we belong to our family. Those other people in the church are "our people."

These are the people who look out for us and these are the people that we look out for. We can depend on them and they can belong to us.

The text today says that "our people" is even bigger than we think.

***Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46***

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him,

then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45 Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (NRSV)

### ***The Least of These***

You have heard about this phrase, "the least of these." You probably couldn't have told me where it was in the Bible. But, you have probably heard at some point that Jesus wants us to reach out to "the least of these." What you probably didn't remember was the context. The passage begins by telling us what happens when Jesus returns. He will return, not in the form of a Jewish peasant, but he will return with all of the angels in his glory. And all of the nations will be gathered before him, like a courtroom. Everyone's work will be shown for what it is.

We often want to remake Jesus just how we like him. We don't want him to be into judging people. We want to think of him as only really, really nice. And yet, whether we like it or not, he tells us that one day there is going to be a reckoning, where deeds are revealed and shown for what they are. In this great scene, he divides people into two groups just as a shepherd would divide up his flock.

To the one group he tells them, "Great job!" They get to gain the reward of God's Kingdom and enter into his rest. The reason that he gives is that they had feed Jesus when he was hungry. They gave him a drink, when he was thirsty. He was a stranger and they had welcomed him and showed him hospitality. He was sick and they took care of him. He was in prison, and they visited him.

You can just see that as he is explaining this, their brows are furrowing. They are turning to one another, saying, "Did you do that? Because, I don't remember doing that." And they say so. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?" And so on.

40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

And the story goes on to with the roles reversed. He explains to the people who didn't measure up, why they are on the left. It was because he had been hungry, thirst, a stranger, sick and in prison and they did nothing. In the same way, you can imagine their confusion. "That is not the case! Jesus, if I would have seen that it was you, I would have fed you and clothed you and visited you and all of the rest."

Jesus tells them, "just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

This presents a somewhat frightening prospect as Jesus is warning us that we will be judged, not just by what we do, but by what we fail to do. We tend to focus on the sins of commission, and ignore the sins of omission. In this passage, its the other way around. We need to see things differently. We need to see others differently.

### ***Famous Author Experiences Generosity***

Sebastian Junger is author of *The Perfect Storm* and *A Death in Belmont*. Long before he became a famous writer, however, he decided to hitchhike his way across the country as an interesting experience. The following story occurred while he was making

his way through the aftermath of a blizzard in Gillette, Wyoming:

After two or three hours I saw a man working his way toward me along the on-ramp from town. He wore filthy canvas coveralls and carried a black lunchbox, and as he got closer I could see that his hair was matted in a way that occurs only after months on the skids. I put my hand on the pepper spray in my pocket and turned to face him.

"You been out here long?" he asked. I nodded.

"Where you headed?"

"California."

"Warm out there."

"Yup."

"You got enough food?"

I thought about this. Clearly he didn't have any, and if I admitted that I did, he'd ask for some. That in itself wasn't a problem, but it would mean opening my backpack and revealing all my obviously expensive camping gear. I felt alone and exposed and ripe for pillage, and I just didn't want to do that. Twenty years later I still remember my answer: "I got some cheese."

"You won't make it to California with just a little cheese," he said. "You'll starve."

At first I didn't understand. What was he saying, exactly? I kept my hand on the pepper spray.

"Believe me," he said, "I know. Listen, I'm living in a car back in town, and every day I walk out to the mine to see if they need me. Today they don't, so I won't be needing this lunch of mine."

I began to sag with understanding. In his world, whatever you have in your bag is all you've got, and he knew "a little cheese" would never get me to California. "I'm fine, really," I said. "I don't need your lunch."

He shook his head and opened his box. It was a typical church meal—a bologna sandwich, an apple, and a bag of chips—and I kept protesting, but he wouldn't hear of it. I finally took his lunch and watched him walk back down the on-ramp toward town.

I learned a lot of things in college, I thought, and I learned a lot from the books on my own. I had learned things in Europe and in Mexico and in my hometown of Belmont, Massachusetts, but I had to stand out there on that frozen piece of interstate to learn true

generosity from a homeless man.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Those in Need***

This poor man is such a powerful and challenging example for us. He had next to nothing, and yet he was even willing to share his nothing.

We tend to evaluate whether or not we should give or help out by looking at what we have. Recent studies have shown that the more money people have, the less generous they are. We see that again in this story. This man did not consider what he had or needed, instead he looked at what Junger lacked.

What is so clear is that Junger saw this man as a threat, or at least a risk. This man might assault him and take his stuff. Or, he might have to give more than he wanted to. More than anything else, it is evident that he saw this man as someone different than himself. He had resources. He had a future. He had a goal. This homeless man did not. He was in a different category.

### ***People Like Us***

We are hard-wired to gravitate toward people like us. If you enter a room of strangers, you will inevitably look for someone who is like you in some way. Maybe they dress like you. Maybe they are reading a magazine you like. Maybe they are about your age. Maybe they have a cell phone like yours. Whatever it may be, we look for commonality because it makes us comfortable. We can handle some difference as long as we can find some commonality. In Junger's story, he saw no commonality with the homeless man.

Junger's story helps me understand our Scripture passage today. Because, I think that the reason why we don't help people is that we don't see them as "people like us." We see them as "other," as different, as risking. When a homeless man comes up to you on the street, you feel threatened, and maybe vulnerable. We tell our kids not to talk to strangers, because we don't know what they're about. I think this is a good thing to tell our children, but it is a problem when we act the same way.

We see people in prison as fundamentally different than us. We are good, law-abiding, righteous people. They are bad, law-breaking criminals. So why would we visit them? If one of my friends or family in prison, one of "my people," I would go visit

<sup>7</sup>Sebastian Junger, "Welcome Stranger," *National Geographic Adventure* (June 2006).

them, but not a stranger.

So many of us have this attitude to the sick as well. How many people HATE hospitals or nursing homes? Maybe you are one of those. We tend to view sick people as fundamentally different from us, who are healthy.

What Jesus was trying to tell us is that all of these people--the least of these--are "our people." We are connected in ways that run deeper than the connections with our families. For every man, woman and child was created like God and bears his image. The gospel tells us that God loves the whole world and he desires not that no one be lost but everyone be saved. He cares for each human being and he sees us all the same. God lived a human life in Jesus. He took up our human condition and made it his own. And he calls us all his family. If we do something for one of his people, Jesus says that it counts as if we did it for him.

Therefore, Christ is to be recognized and welcomed in the stranger. Jesus the most desirable guest, comes in the form of the vulnerable stranger. The possibility that we are serving Jesus can overcome the resistance and fear that we may have.

### **CAM**

Today, we are having our Souper Bowl lunch, in which we have invited everyone, adults and kids alike, to make a contribution of food or money, which we will donate to CAM, which is Clayton Area Ministries. They have a wonderful ministry, which virtually no overhead expenses, providing food to our neighbors in need. They also help folks out once a year with things like utility bills. We have been strong supporters of CAM because it helps us stay connected to meeting the needs of our hungry neighbors.

Giving them resources is one thing, but surely being personally involved is better. So, if you are available on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday between 1 - 3pm, stop by and see if they could use any help. In meeting the folks as they come in, you might just find that Christ meets you in a special way.

So many of us work or have other obligations and don't have those timeslots available. All of us, though, can keep our eyes open and remind ourselves, when we see people that look different, that they are really "our people" in Christ. In serving them, we are serving Christ.

### ***Jesus Serves Us***

We turn to the Lord's Supper. One thing that happens when we serve others, is

that we can soon get tired. We can find our resources depleted. We can get drained. As we come to the table this morning, we remember that Christ doesn't first ask that we serve him. He first serves us. Before he is our guest, he is the host who invites us to his table. He offers us acceptance and love. He treats us as part of his family. And he nourishes us. He meets our needs. As he pours out his cup, it is to fill ours. And so, having been filled, we can go out and serve others in his name. So come to the Lord's table at the Lord's bidding and find refreshment for your souls.

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